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MATT CARDY / GETTY IMAGES



40 *Mummer's the word!*



58 *In search of the Cheshire cat*




20 *The ghost of Thomas Becket*



34 *The golden age of BBC Ghost Stories for Christmas*

COVER IMAGE: THE SIGNALMAN FROM *GHOST STORIES: CLASSIC ADAPTATIONS FROM THE BBC VOLUME FOUR* (BFI DVD). COURTESY BFI & BBC

NIKOLAY DOYCHINOV / AFP / GETTY IMAGES



FORTEAN TIMES 387

Why **fortean** ?

Everything you always wanted to know about *Fortean Times* but were too paranoid to ask!

SEE PAGE
78

STRANGE DAYS

A digest of the worldwide weird, including: Russian Napoleon kills girlfriend, devil's fingers, super-strength, and much more...

- | | |
|---------------|-------------------------|
| 14 SCIENCE | 25 MYTHCONCEPTIONS |
| 16 ARCHÆOLOGY | 31 FAIRIES AND FOLKLORE |
| 20 GHOSTWATCH | 32 THE UFO FILES |

FEATURES

34 COVER STORY A GHOST STORY FOR CHRISTMAS

EDWARD PARNELL recalls a tradition of seasonal scares as he travels back to the 1970s and a golden age of television ghost stories produced by the BBC from the works of MR James and Charles Dickens – a tradition being revived this Christmas...

40 KEEPING MUMM

LISA GLEDHILL meets the mysterious men behind a curious Christmas custom that still persists in pubs and streets up and down the country every Boxing Day

44 THE BISHOP'S TORPEDO REVISITED

A century after Charles Fort presented one of his “most remarkable” cases in *The Book of the Damned*, **MARTIN SHOUGH** and **WIM VAN UTRECHT** attempt to solve the mystery of the Bishop's Torpedo, a strange, fiery object that exploded over Burlington, Vermont, in 1907.

REPORTS

28 RENDLESHAM REVISITED

Colonel Halt Returns to Woodbridge **MATT SALUSBURY**

52 STRANGE STATESMEN

Returning Japanese **SD TUCKER**

FORUM

57 Zombies, vampires, killer clowns **TEA KRULOS**

58 A grin without a cat **ROB GANDY**

REGULARS

- | | | |
|--------------|----------------|-------------------|
| 02 EDITORIAL | 73 LETTERS | 79 PHENOMENOMIX |
| 61 REVIEWS | 78 READER INFO | 80 STRANGE DEATHS |

EDITOR
DAVID SUTTON
(drsutton@forteantimes.com)

FOUNDING EDITORS
BOB RICKARD (bobrickard@mail.com)
PAUL SIEVEKING (sieveking@forteantimes.com)

ART DIRECTOR
ETIENNE GILFILLAN
(etienne@forteantimes.com)

BOOK REVIEWS EDITOR
VAL STEVENSON
(val@forteantimes.com)

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
ABIGAIL MASON

RESIDENT CARTOONIST
HUNT EMERSON

SUBSCRIPTION ENQUIRIES AND BACK ISSUES
www.managemymags.co.uk
customercare@subscribe.forteantimes.com

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USA & Canada subscriptions: (+1) 800-428-3003 (toll free)
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Other overseas subscriptions: +44 (0)330 333 9492

LICENSING & SYNDICATION
FORTEAN TIMES IS AVAILABLE FOR INTERNATIONAL LICENSING AND SYNDICATION – CONTACT: Syndication Manager
RYAN CHAMBERS TEL: +44 (0) 20 3890 4027
ryan_chambers@dennis.co.uk
Senior Licensing Manager
CARLOTTA SERANTONI TEL: +44 (0) 20 3890 3840
carlotta_serantoni@dennis.co.uk
Licensing & Syndication Executive
NICOLE ADAMS TEL: +44 (0) 20 3890 3998
nicole_adams@dennis.co.uk

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PUBLISHER
DHARMESH MISTRY
dharmesh_mistry@
dennis.co.uk

dennis.co.uk

CIRCULATION MANAGER
JAMES MANGAN
james.mangan@
seymour.co.uk

**GROUP ADVERTISING
DIRECTOR LIFESTYLE**
ANDREA MASON
020 3890 3814
andrea_mason@
dennis.co.uk

**EXPORT CIRCULATION
MANAGER**
GERALDINE GROBLER
geraldine.grobler@
seymour.co.uk

ACCOUNT MANAGER
IMOGEN WILLIAMS
020 3890 3739
imogen_williams@
dennis.co.uk

**CREATIVE REPRO
ARTWORKER**
FRANCESCA CINQUEPALMI
francesca_cinquepalmi@

ACCOUNT DIRECTOR
JENNIFER BRYAN
020 3890 3744

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BRETT REYNOLDS
KERIN O'CONNOR
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EDITORIAL



CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

MYSTERIES AND MUMMERS



WANTAGE MUMMERS

Welcome to our last issue of 2019, which we hope offers a sufficiently generous selection of seasonal weirdness to see you through the dark December days and safely into the New Year.

We continue to celebrate the centenary of Charles Fort's *The Book of the Damned*, first published in December 1919. This time, rather than looking at the reception of Fort's seminal text, we revisit one of the anomalies he enumerated in its pages – the case of the 'Bishop's Torpedo': "That, July 2, 1907, in the town of Burlington, Vermont, a terrific explosion had been heard throughout the city. A ball of light, or a luminous object, had been seen to fall from the sky – or from a torpedo-shaped thing, or construction, in the sky."

Nowadays, we'd probably describe this as a multi-witness UFO or UAP event; Fort described it as "perhaps the most remarkable" of the many cases of the type he had collected, precisely because of the close range at which it had been observed that day by numerous respectable citizens of Burlington – including Bishop John Stephen Michaud, the city's Catholic Bishop from 1899 to 1908. One hundred years on, Martin Hough and Wim van Utrecht have revisited the case of the Bishop's Torpedo to see what new light can be shed on the incident: will our knowledge of balloon accidents, ball lightning or aurora-related phenomena finally solve the mystery? You'll have to read their comprehensive article (p44) to find out.

Elsewhere (p40), Lisa Gledhill meets

the mummers and looks into another long-standing mystery: who are these strange men who don silly costumes to perform the same play every Christmas in pubs and streets up and down the country? Is it a pagan survival, an invented tradition, or, as one of the Yateley mummers has it, just "tremendous fun"? Meanwhile, Edward Parnell (p34) looks at the genesis of another, more recent, festive tradition – that of the Ghost Story for Christmas – from MR James trying out his new stories on fellow Cambridge academics on Christmas Eve, to Lawrence Gordon Clark's cherished BBC adaptations of the 1970s, and Mark Gatiss's revival of the custom with this year's TV adaptation of James's story 'Martin's Close'.

ERRATA

FT384:16: The eagle-eyed Martin Jenkins spotted not one but two typos in this issue's archaeology column: "It's Marcus Terentius Varro (not Vorro, and only one r in Terentius), and 'tithes' not 'tythes'."

FT385:9: Pete emailed to say: "May I be the 94th correspondent to point out that, while Tau Ceti, at magnitude 3.5, is visible to the naked eye, its planets are certainly not." Actually, Pete, was the first and only correspondent to set us right on that score.

David R Sutton
DAVID R SUTTON

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

'NAPOLEON' DISMEMBERS LOVER

Russian academic pulled from St Petersburg river with backpack containing a woman's arms

A prominent Russian academic has confessed to murdering his young lover and former student. Professor Oleg Sokolov, 63, a Napoleon expert who received France's Legion of Honour from Jacques Chirac in 2003, was arrested on 9 November after he was hauled out of icy water with a backpack containing a stun gun and a woman's arms. He was reportedly drunk and fell into the Moika river, a tributary of the Neva, in central St Petersburg as he tried to dispose of the backpack near the offices of investigators. He had planned to commit suicide at the Peter and Paul Fortress, one of the former imperial capital's most famous landmarks, dressed as Napoleon.

Sokolov taught history at St Petersburg State University, Vladimir Putin's alma mater. He told investigators that he shot and killed his lover on 7 November during an argument and then sawed off her head, arms and legs. Searching his home, police discovered the decapitated body of Anastasia Yeshchenko, 24, with whom Sokolov had co-authored a number of works, a bloodstained saw, a shotgun, an axe and ammunition; her legs were found in the Moika river.

The historian, who also taught at the Sorbonne, is the author of several books on Napoleon, acted as a consultant on several films and took part in historical re-enactments of Napoleonic wars. Both he and his lover studied French history and liked to wear period costumes. Students described him as a talented lecturer who could impersonate the French



OLEG NIKISHIN / GETTY IMAGES



ABOVE: Sokolov leads his men into battle at a reenactment of Borodino.

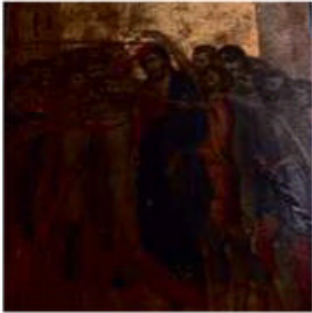
LEFT: Russian police conduct searches on St Petersburg's Moika River.

French president, Emmanuel Macron. Sokolov was a senior member of the Russian Military Historical Society headed by culture minister Vladimir Medinsky. The organisation immediately sought to distance itself from the controversy. Sokolov was also a member of Lyon-based Institute of Social Science, Economics and Politics (ISSEP), which announced that he had been stripped of his position on its scientific committee. ISSEP was founded by Marion Maréchal, the niece of Marine Le Pen, leader of the far-right National Rally party. *theguardian.com*, 10 Nov; *BBC News*, 10+11 Nov 2019.

emperor and his generals. He was a "freak" who called his lover "Josephine" and asked to be addressed as "Sire". Fyodor Danilov, a former student of his, said he was regarded as one of the university's best lecturers but also an eccentric man who at times yelled in French. In 2008,

Sokolov beat up and threatened to burn with a hot iron and kill another female student, but was never charged.

A spokeswoman for the Grand Chancery of the Legion of Honour indicated that Sokolov might be stripped of his award. The final decision rests with the



OLD MASTER MYSTERY

Priceless painting turns up in kitchen

PAGE 10



WE HAVE LIFT OFF!

When people tap into their superpowers

PAGE 24



STRANGE INVADERS

Devil's fingers and Turkish bees in Britain?

PAGE 26

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

NOEL ROONEY stumbles upon a complex left wing plot to create an independent California which allegedly involves everyone from Mexican Mormons to the Vatican and the Chinese...

THE CALEXIT CONSPIRACY

The brutal murders of nine Mormons, three women and six of their children, in the Sierra Madre mountains of Mexico, on 4 November, made for grisly headlines around the world. From the moment the news broke, it was assumed by most observers that the tragic incident was just another in the string of massacres committed as part of the ongoing wars between Mexico's powerful drug cartels. The Mexican government suggested it was a case of mistaken identity: the unfortunate families had strayed into territory disputed by two of the biggest cartels and been executed.

Mormons have lived in Mexico since the late 19th century, mainly breakaway fundamentalist groups practising polygamy. The shooting victims belonged to churches largely run by the LeBarón family, who settled in Mexico in the 1920s and made headlines in the 1970s when sectarian divisions culminated in at least one high-profile assassination, after Ervil LeBarón founded the Church of the Firstborn of the Lamb of God (see **FT347:36-43**).

There were rumours immediately after the killings that the LeBarón family had made some kind of pact with the cartels that allowed them to prosper in Mexico; some observers went so far as to suggest that the Mormons did more than turn a blind eye to cartel activities. In recent years, however, some of the LeBarón family have spoken out against the drug-fuelled violence among the cartels, to their cost; in 2009, Benjamin LeBarón and his brother-in-law, Luis Widmar, were kidnapped, tortured and murdered, presumably as a warning to the community to keep out of cartel business.

There is another, murkier sidebar to the story; an article in the *New York Post* claimed that the Mormon community where the victims lived had connections to the Nxivm cult. It alleged that Keith Raniere, the disgraced leader of Nxivm, recruited young women from the Mexican Mormons

to work as nannies in a New York centre run by the cult. Some in the Conspirasphere have jumped on this claim to suggest that the LeBarón family were involved in people trafficking. Then the murk really begins to hit the Conspirasphere fan. The killings, it is claimed, are part of an attempt to start a US-Mexican war; this is connected to an alleged plot by the Vatican to create a hybrid religion called 'Chrislam' and to introduce a Satanic element into Latin American Christianity. Deep state actors tried to persuade Trump to order an invasion of Mexico in response to the killings, but the Donald refused, thus thwarting a plan to have the UN and the Chinese step in and move events on towards the ultimate goal of the conspiracy: Calexit.

Calexit is, in the real world, an initiative to have California secede from the Union and become an independent state; it's one of a number of ideas to keep California, the world's fifth-largest economy, out of the clutches of the Trump project. It has some limited support, and a high profile, but is unlikely to garner enough votes to succeed. In the Conspirasphere, however, Calexit is a rather more sinister affair. It is nothing less than a full-blown left-wing conspiracy, backed by the usual suspects, to either create an independent, largely Latino republic on the west coast, or spearhead a Great Replacement gambit to flood the USA with non-white immigrants and dilute the white population in the largest and most prosperous state of the Union. In either case, the Mexican murder connection is (apparently) self-evident, and among other things is the harbinger of a full UN invasion of the USA.

It seems a long way from the senseless (and likely mistaken) murder of innocent women and children to a nefarious plot to invade the USA. But in the Conspirasphere distance is no object; daring a synaptic spacewalk gets you to the strangest of places in no time at all.

EXTRA! EXTRA!



THE ADVENTURES OF JESUS IN NEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

EXPRESS DERAILED BY JESUS

National Student, Dec 2006.

Madonna romps with Jesus in Brazilian hotel

Metro, c.12 Feb 2009.

FEDS: JESUS, MARY AND JOSEPH USED TO SMUGGLE COCAINE

Washington (DC) Examiner, 20 Oct 2010.

'Jesus' was insane at time of arson

Metro Herald (Dublin), 1 May 2013.

NUDE JESUS RESTRAINED AFTER FLATS RAMPAGE

Sunday Sport, 30 Aug 2015.

Jesus 'with his bum out' sparks police response in Exeter city centre

Devon Live, 18 Dec 2017.

POLICE SEEKING JESUS AFTER ASSAULT ON JEDI

D.Telegraph, 4 Nov 2017.

THE GREAT PUMPKIN WEIGH-OFF

Cindy Tobeck of Olympia, Washington, stands on top of her 1,736lb [787kg] pumpkin during the Safeway World Championship Pumpkin Weigh-Off on 14 October 2019 in Half Moon Bay, California. Leonardo Urena (seen on the opposite page at bottom), a farmer from Napa, California, took first prize in the annual weigh-off with his 2,175lb [987kg] monster. He won \$7 per pound for a total of \$15,225. PHOTOS: CARL COURT/GETTY IMAGES







SIDELINES...

BET WAS A GIANT STEP

The Moon landing changed history for bookmakers when William Hill took the first ever British bet that was not sports related. In 1964, David Threlfall (20) placed a £10 bet with odds of 1,000-1 that a man would walk on the Moon before 1 January 1970. Hill had to pay him £10,000 – and £50,000 to others who had made similar wagers. (Threlfall died after crashing the sports car he had bought.) *D.Telegraph, 20 July 2019.*

SHOOT FOR THE MOON

At a party in Moscow to make a successful trade deal in June 1969, Tim Spencer asked an elderly Russian functionary how the Americans had beaten the USSR to the Moon. “Very simple,” he replied; “American Germans are better than our Germans.” *D.Telegraph, 20 July 2019.*

INVISIBLE PORKER

Two lost hikers in the Government Canyon State Park in Texas took refuge in a tree from what they thought was a “growling” feral pig before calling the police. It turned out to be the sound of cars passing over rumble strips on a nearby road. *<i> 5 July 2019.*

PILFERING PUSS

A cat called Theo was notorious in Ipswich, Suffolk, for stealing Christmas decorations and toys, which owner Rachael Drouet would then try to return. She joked it would be better if the eight-year-old Siamese cross brought home cash instead of ‘tat’. Theo then appeared with a plastic bag containing £25.70 that a neighbour had left out for the milkman. Luckily, there was a note inside with an address. *BBC News, 5 Mar 2019.*



MARTIN ROSS

POLICE BLOTTER | The dragnet hauls in subcontract killers, a fugitive Chinese caveman and more...



ABOVE: In a bizarre court case, six men – including five hitmen – appeared in a Chinese court charged with “intentional homicide”, after each attempted to subcontract the killing to another hitman. BELOW: Memory man Yusuke Taniguchi.

PASSING THE BUCK

Six men in China have been jailed for attempted murder after they all tried to pass on a contract to kill that they were reluctant to carry out in person. Real estate businessman Qin (or Tan) Youhui began the saga in 2013 when he hired contract killer Xi Guangan to eliminate a rival, Mr Wei, who was suing him at the time. Mr Xi pocketed half of the two million yuan (£218,000) that Mr Qin paid out and then passed the task to another assassin at a reduced fee. The killing was then contracted out an additional three times until a fifth man entered the picture, Ling Xinsi. By then, it was April 2014, and Mr Ling was offered a mere 100,000 yuan (£10,900). Deciding it wasn’t enough, he contacted Mr Wei. They met in a coffee shop, where Mr Ling told Mr Wei, “For just 100,000 yuan I don’t want to kill you, but you have to cooperate with me.” The two men staged Mr Wei’s death, sending photos of the faked murder scene along as proof of job done. In yet another twist, Mr Wei later reported the entire incident to the local police in Nanning, a city in the southern province of Guangxi. Enough evidence was found to bring the

They sent photos of the faked murder scene as proof of job done

case to trial, but in 2016 the six defendants were acquitted – extremely unusual in a country with a 99.9 per cent conviction rate. Prosecutors appealed, and this October the Nanning Intermediate People’s Court handed down jail sentences ranging from two years seven months for Mr Ling to five years for Mr Qin. *BBC News, 22 Oct; D.Telegraph, 23 Oct 2019.*

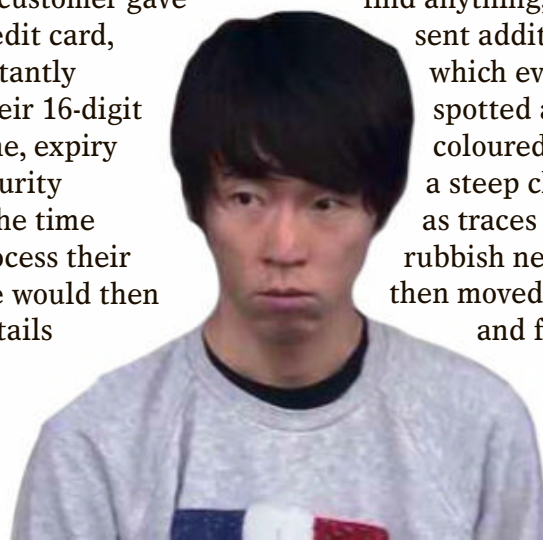
TOO CLEVER BY HALF

Yusuke Taniguchi, 34, a payment till operator in a mall in Koto City, Japan, has an eidetic (photographic) memory. Whenever a customer gave him their credit card, he would instantly memorise their 16-digit number, name, expiry date and security code, all in the time it took to process their purchase. He would then use these details

to buy stuff online, which he then sold through a pawnshop. But Taniguchi’s wild talent was not matched by common sense. He failed to realise that providing his home address when making online purchases with stolen credit card details was a bad idea. After his arrest, he confessed to having stolen credit card information from over 1,300 people. *Sankei News (Japan), 6 Aug 2019.*

SONG TRACKED TO CAVE

Chinese police have arrested a fugitive who had been on the run for 17 years. Song Jiang, 63, had been jailed for trafficking women and children, but escaped from a prison camp in 2002. In early September 2019, Yongshan police received clues about Song’s whereabouts that led them to the mountains behind his hometown in Yunnan province in south-west China. After regular searches failed to find anything, authorities sent additional drones, which eventually spotted a blue-coloured steel tile on a steep cliff as well as traces of household rubbish nearby. Police then moved in on foot and found Song



NANNING INTERMEDIATE PEOPLE’S COURT



in a small cave where he'd been hiding for years. He had used plastic bottles to get drinking water from a river, and branches of trees to make fire. He was sent back to jail. *BBC News, 30 Sept 2019.*

SKILL MISAPPLIED

On 1 September, Hibiki Sato, 26, of Saiama near Tokyo, was arrested on a charge of causing injury by forcible indecency to Ena Matsuoka, 21, a singer with a Japanese pop group. Police suspected Sato was able to narrow down the area in Tokyo where Ms Matsuoka lived by going through her social media photographs, enlarging them to reveal scenery and landmarks reflected in her eyes. He is then alleged to have explored Google Maps to narrow down the area where she lived using the application's street view, identifying a railway station near her home, before stalking her. It is thought Sato waited at the station and followed her from there after a concert. As she entered her apartment building, he allegedly placed a towel over her head, threw her to the ground and groped her. *D.Telegraph, Guardian, 12 Oct 2019.*



ABOVE: Hibiki Sato (left) was arrested for stalking and attacking Ena Matsuoka (right).

MUTILATION

Danes make about £500 million a year, or £85 a head, claiming for fake accidents and self-mutilation, according to Tryg, the largest insurer. One Dane sliced his little finger off with a buzz saw. Another borrowed a neighbour's excavator, dug a hole 5m (16ft) deep and pushed his company car into it. A third reported losing an iPhone seven times. None surpassed the grim determination of a retired farmer who stuck his right leg out in front of a train in Latvia to claim £1.4 million on his three accident policies. The man, now in his mid-fifties, had previously severed his own

wrist with an angle grinder in 2000. His hand was sewn back on by surgeons, but had to be cut off again nine years later after he lost the use of his fingers. He then took up competitive Nordic walking and won a national championship. In 2011 he was rambling in the Latvian countryside when he was hit by a train and his right leg was amputated above the knee. He argued that he didn't hear the train coming because he was listening to music on headphones – but the judges ruled that it had been “no accident” and that the man was not owed a penny by his insurers. *Times, 26 Jan 2019.*

SIDELINES...

UNREWARDING

A company founded in 1987 and run by Mike St Lawrence of Altamonte Springs, Florida, has sold 6,000 alien abduction insurance policies at £21 each, worth £8.25 million in compensation. But read the small print: for successful claims, the company will only pay out one dollar per annum over a 10 to 20 million year period. *D.Mirror, 3 Aug 2019.*

NOT A PLANE CRASH

On 8 September, a land and air search was launched in Devon after dozens of callers alerted police to what appeared to be an aircraft breaking apart and falling towards the ground at about 5.45am. By 9am UK Meteor Network (a network of astronomers with meteor detection cameras) had received 68 reports of a fireball meteor from as far away as Dorset and Cardiff, which accounted for the supposed plane crash. *BBC News, 8 Sept 2019.*

MYSTERY MESSAGE

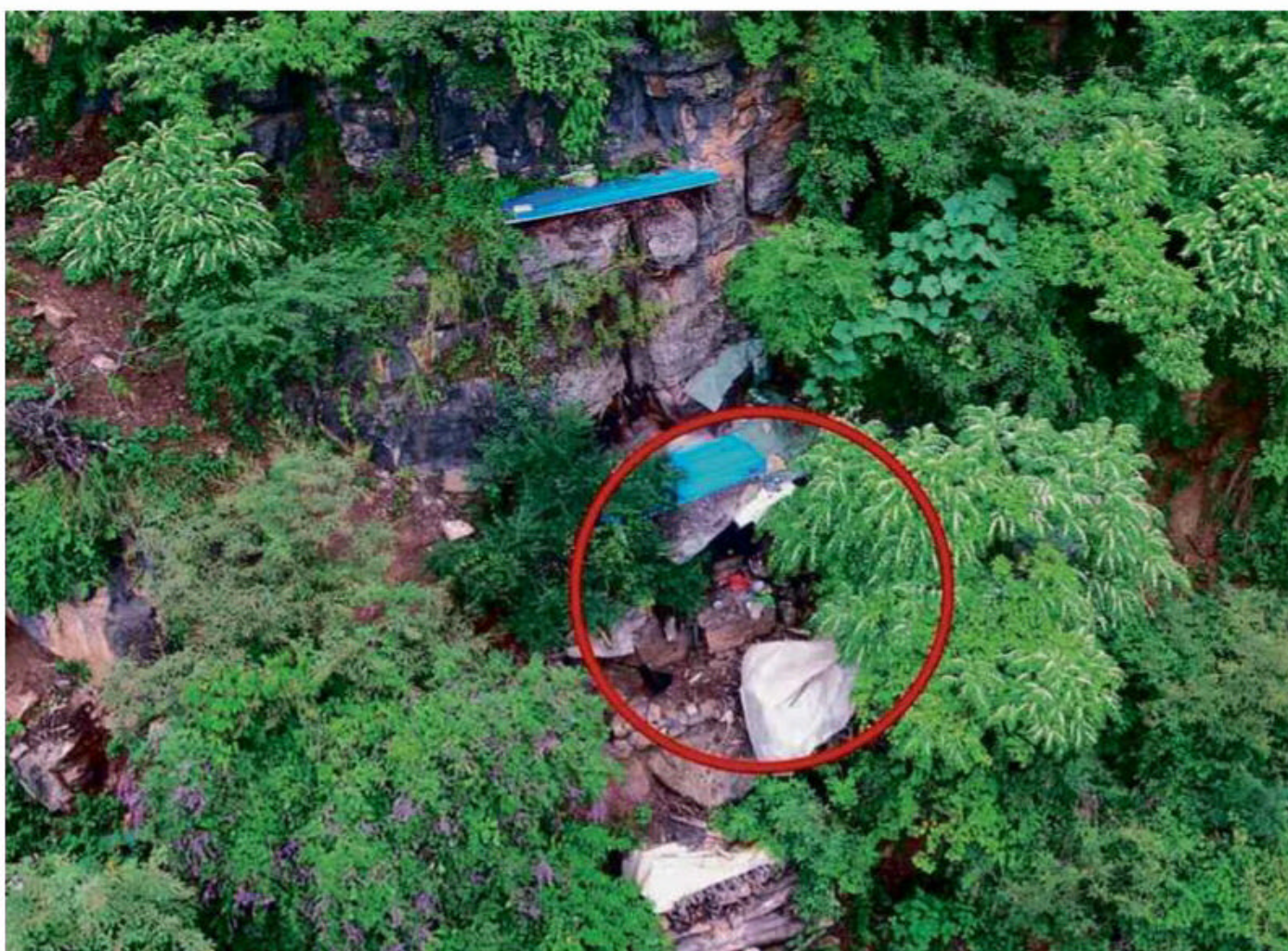
Dr HL Eirew attended a demonstration of Chinese writing in Hong Kong and the scribe asked him what his profession was. Later he was given a plaque, which he was told read: “The world's best orthodontist”. It hung proudly in his waiting room until a Chinese patient told him: “I cannot possibly tell you what it says, but I suggest that you burn it immediately.” *D.Telegraph, 3 Sept 2019.*

TUNNEL TALENT

Israeli troops and police enlisted a clairvoyant rabbi to help them hunt for Hezbollah tunnels stretching into Israel from Lebanon. The 50-year-old known as Yehuda, a follower of a mystic form of Judaism, joined security forces on patrols between 2013 and 2016. However, the Israel Defence Force was not convinced and ordered a halt to the patrols. *independent.ie, 23 May 2019.*

CALL OF THE WILD

A domestic goose feared killed by a fox a year earlier returned home to the Shire Horse Trust, near Redruth, Cornwall, along with a flock of wild Canada geese. Staff said he refused to join his old gaggle, *Metro, 8 May 2019.*



ABOVE: The cave where people trafficker Song Jiang, a fugitive for 17 years, was finally tracked down and arrested.



SIDELINES...

CHILD REINCARNATED

A couple in Nakorn Nayok, Thailand, believe a *Nok Kwak* (white breasted waterhen) that has stayed with them for the last six months is the spirit of a child of theirs who died many years ago. 'Ja Jaa', as they call it, is not caged and comes and goes. Aree, 63, said Ja Jaa showers with other members of the family and sleeps in a nest on her husband's workbench. The bird never craps in the house. *Thaivisa.com*, 22 July 2019.

UNEXPECTED CURE

Last autumn, while picking plums in his garden, a man was stung by a wasp in the middle of his bald pate. His face swelled dramatically and he was advised to take a week's course of antihistamine tablets. As the swelling subsided, he realised his long-standing tinnitus had disappeared – and it has never returned. Looking online, he found a similar dramatic remission of tinnitus following a bee sting in front of the ear. *D.Telegraph*, 8 July 2019.

BANANA SPLITS

Two men with the same name spotted each other dressed as bananas in social media profile photos. The two Ben Codringtons are unrelated and were born weeks apart 21 years ago. Both are amateur stand-up comics and like gaming and rap. One is a geography student from Bromley, Kent; the other a computer science student from Toronto – where the pair met up and became good friends. *Sun*, 28 May 2019.



MARTIN ROSS

OLD MASTER MYSTERY | Mediæval masterpiece turns up in house move



PHILIPPE LOPEZ / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: The small painting had hung for decades in a French kitchen before being identified as Cimabue's *Christ Mocked*.

A tiny early Renaissance masterpiece fetched more than 24m (£20m) at auction on 27 October, making it the most expensive mediæval painting ever sold. (*Salvator Mundi*, the dodgy Leonardo painting, fetched almost £350 million at Christies in 2017, but that's post-mediæval.)

Christ Mocked, by the 13th-century Florentine painter Cimabue, had hung for decades above a cooking hotplate in the open-plan kitchen of a 1960s house near Compiègne, north of Paris. It had never attracted much attention from the unnamed occupant, in her 90s, or her family, who thought it was simply an old Russian icon. They had no idea where it had come from or how it had come into the family's hands. Measuring just 8in by 10in (20x26cm), it might have been thrown away during a house move last June had it not been spotted by Philomène Wolf, who had come to value furniture. About 100 other objects from the house were sold for around

Cimabues have been lost in wars, floods and earthquakes

£5,200 and the remaining furniture and decorations were disposed of at the local dump. The tempera panel is the only Cimabue that has ever come on the market. It was bought by a London-based dealer at Actéon auction house in Senlis on behalf of two unnamed collectors.

Cimabue, also known as Cenni di Pepo, was one of the pioneering artists of the early Italian Renaissance and taught Giotto. He broke from the Byzantine style and began to incorporate elements of movement and perspective that came to characterise Western painting. Only 11 works painted on wood have been attributed to him, none of

them signed. Several Cimabues have been lost in wars, floods and earthquakes. Infrared reflectography confirmed that the newly discovered panel was part of a larger diptych from 1280, when Cimabue painted eight scenes of the passion and crucifixion of Christ. Each of the two panels in the diptych had four scenes. Two scenes from the same diptych, known as *The Virgin and Child with Two Angels* and *The Flagellation of Christ*, already hang in the National Gallery in London and the Frick Collection in New York. The pattern of wormholes on the back of the panels conform that all three panels came from the left side of the same diptych. The Frick panel was acquired in 1950, while the National Gallery's was discovered in a house in Suffolk and was acquired by private treaty in 2000 for about £7.2 million. A further five panels may be languishing somewhere unrecognised. *D.Telegraph*, 25 Sept; *theguardian.com*, *NY Times*, *BBC News*, 27 Oct 2019.



MAGIC MARKINGS | Rare polka dot zebra spotted in Kenya, plus Yorkshire meta-beagle



YASUYOSHI CHIBA / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Polka-dotted zebra foal Tira stands next to her striped mother. **BELOW:** Beagle puppy Hazel with her 'beagle' markings.

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE!

A newborn zebra with a polka dot pattern over its dark coat attracted a stampede of tourists at Kenya's Maasai Mara game reserve in September. The mutant was born to a standard black-and-white striped female and was named Tira after the Maasai guide who discovered it. None of the melanistic zebras recorded in other African parks has lived very long, possibly because predators pick on prey that stand out from the herd. *dailymail.co.uk*, 17 Sept; *D.Telegraph*, 18 Sept; *Sun*, 25 Sept; *independent.co.uk*, 4 Oct 2019.

SHE'S BEHIND YOU!

Shannon Austin, 31, from Rotherham, South Yorkshire, was amazed to see these markings on nine-week-old beagle puppy Hazel. They formed the outline of a second beagle, complete with a lighter snout. "The markings were spots when I met her at three weeks old," she said. "I think she is quite unique." *Sun*, 12 July 2019.



SIDELINES...

LATIN NEWS ENDS

Finland broadcast its last, world famous, Friday news bulletin in Latin, *Nuntii Latini*, on 14 June 2019. The first five-minute bulletin was on 1 September 1989; the week of the last broadcast saw the Catholic Church launch *Hebdomada Papæ* (The Pope's Week), its own news bulletin in Latin, but this offers a much narrower news agenda. *BBC News*, 17 June 2019.

TELEVISION BANDIT

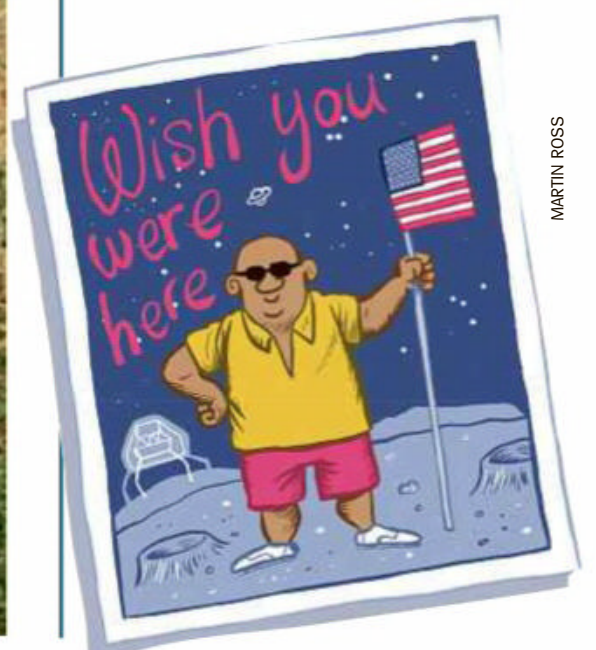
At least 60 residents in Virginia have woken up to find old TV sets sitting outside their front doors. Adrian Garner caught the culprit on a home security camera. "It was a guy dressed in a jumpsuit with a TV for a head," he said. "It's the weirdest thing. He squats down, puts the TV there and walks off." *Sky News*, 13 Aug 2019.

DENTAL NEWS

On 14 May, hundreds of human teeth were found scattered across the A6 in Forton, Lancashire. And in July, Emily Sullivan, 38, dug up a box in her garden in Modbury, Devon, filled with five sets of false teeth. *D.Mirror*, 15 May; *Metro*, 9 July 2019.

VIRTUAL BREAKS

Fake a Vacation, a Nebraska-based business, offers expertly faked photos of imaginary holidays. For \$19.99 it will superimpose the photos of a social media user in front of famous landmarks including Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, Hawaii and Walt Disney World. Facts about each destination help the customer concoct their holiday narrative [UPI] 25 April 2019.



MARTIN ROSS



SIDELINES...

LO! THE INTERNET

On 29 October 1969, mainframe computers at the University of California, Los Angeles, and the Stanford Research Institute 500km (310 miles) up the coast, exchanged their first word through their companion IMPs (Interface Message Processors). It was, somewhat biblically: “Lo” (the title of Charles Fort’s third book). The operator had been trying to type: “Login” and the network had collapsed after two letters. A stuttering start – but the Arpanet had been switched on, and the Internet would follow. *BBC News, 16 Oct 2019.*

WALKING BACKWARDS

On 25 July, Medi Bastoni, 43, set out from Dono, his village in East Java, to walk 500 miles (800km) backwards to raise awareness about forest conservation. He planned to ask President Joko Widodo in Jakarta for a symbolic tree seed to plant on the slopes of Mount Willis, a volcanic mountain in East Java. *Guardian, 27 July 2019.*

SOME SAY IT'S LUCKY

As Democratic state Representative Jaime Andrade discussed the problem of pigeons fowling pavements with a reporter outside the Irving Park Blue Line railway station in Chicago, he rubbed the top of his head and said, “I think they just got me.” A pigeon had crapped on his head. *[AP] 16 Sept 2019.*

SECRETED REPTILE

A deputy sheriff stopped a pickup truck in Punta Gorda, Florida, on 6 May after it ran a stop sign. Driver Michael Clemons (22) told him he and Ariel Machan-Le Quire (25) had been collecting frogs and snakes under an overpass. The deputy found 41 three-stripe turtles in the woman’s backpack; asked if she had anything else, she pulled a foot-long (30cm) alligator out of her yoga pants. *[AP] 7 May 2019.*

A TAD TOO ORGANIC

Jack Devaney, 25, a taxidermist from Plymouth, Devon, was criticised for making toys with real chicken heads. He buys frozen, day-old chicks, puts the heads on springs and sells them online for £10. In 2017 he was banned from Facebook for using dead rats to make children’s pencil cases. *Sun, 21 July 2019.*

GIANT JELLIES

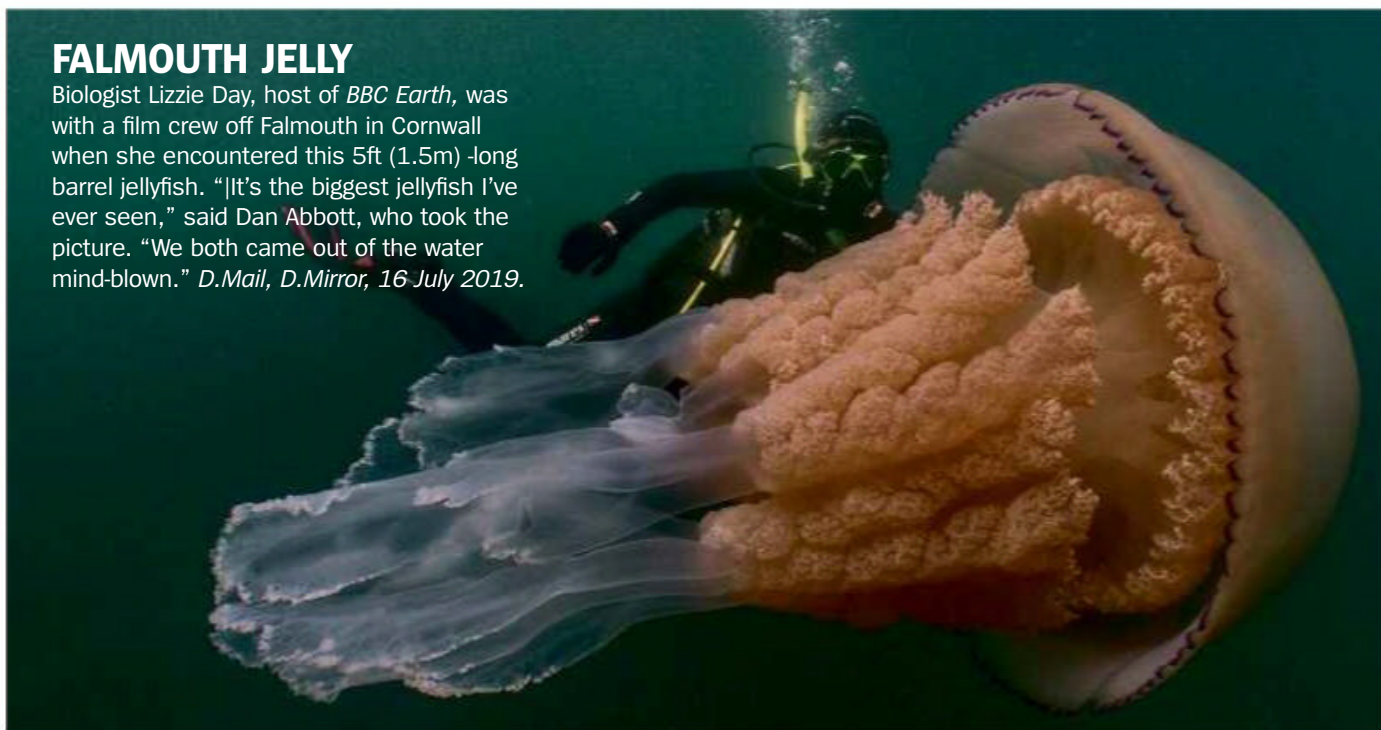


LION'S MANE JELLIES

Giant jellyfish that look like oozing, bloody blobs of goo have washed ashore in Maine more frequently this year than hitherto. Lion’s mane jellyfish (sometimes called red jellyfish) have tentacles that can reach a length of 100ft (30m), making them the largest known jellyfish on the planet. Not only were there more of them this year, but many were noticeably larger than usual. “In a typical year, the biggest ones that people would report are the size of a dinner plate, and this year, I’ve gotten several reports of some that are two feet [60cm] and a couple that are five feet [150cm] across,” said Nicholas Record, a senior research scientist at Bigelow Laboratory for Ocean Sciences in East Boothbay, Maine. “They’re generally a sub-Arctic species and they’re not new to the Gulf of Maine by any means; but the size and just the fact that they’re all we’re seeing this year is what makes it unique.” *weather.com, 17 Sept 2019.*

FALMOUTH JELLY

Biologist Lizzie Day, host of *BBC Earth*, was with a film crew off Falmouth in Cornwall when she encountered this 5ft (1.5m) -long barrel jellyfish. “It’s the biggest jellyfish I’ve ever seen,” said Dan Abbott, who took the picture. “We both came out of the water mind-blown.” *D.Mail, D.Mirror, 16 July 2019.*



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Fracked off

DAVID HAMBLING reports on the inconvenient truth that human activity can have seismic effects

In November, the British government brought fracking operations in the UK to an abrupt halt. Previously, any notion that fracking, or hydraulic fracturing to get oil or gas might produce a rash of earthquakes looked like conspiracy theory. Fracking had been widely practised in the US for years. Then came a report revealing that fracking really was liable to produce earthquakes whose magnitude could not be predicted; the danger that had seemed incredible was real and the government U-turned.

To the ancient Greeks, earthquakes were caused by the shifting of the turtle that carried the Earth, or the elephants supporting the turtle, or perhaps the movement of underground dragons or other giant beasts. We now know that the Earth's surface is a jigsaw of tectonic plates, each a slab of rock hundreds of miles across. Pressure builds up in the fault lines between these plates, and when a section of rock slips the result is an earthquake. It was always assumed that the forces involved were too gigantic for ant-like humans to have any effect.

When large reservoirs were built though, seismic activity nearby seemed to increase. This was suspected with the Hoover Dam on the Colorado River in the US in the late 1930s. The randomness of the quakes meant that a causal connection was hard to prove, but after a worldwide spate of dam-building in the 1960s, the evidence was piling up. Earthquakes of greater than magnitude 6 – powerful enough to cause severe damage in densely populated areas – occurred near new reservoirs at Kremasta in Greece, Hsinfengkiang in China and Kariba in Zambia. The most destructive happened at Kyona in India in December 1967 when 200 people died and thousands were made homeless. Kyona in particular was a red flag. There were five to six earthquakes a year within 25km (16 miles) of the dam after it was built, but no other seismic activity in a 100km (64-mile) radius.

This attracted plenty of scientific attention, and in 1970 two researchers from the University of Alberta showed that the increased seismic activity was caused by 'incremental loading'. Damming a river and producing a lake where there had been none before adds millions of tons to the pressure on the bedrock, the final straw making it more likely for tectonic plates already under pressure to slip. The rate of increase of the



The randomness of the quakes meant that a causal connection was hard to prove

water level, and the duration of high water, affected the frequency and magnitude of earthquakes. Later, more nuanced models showed that increasing the 'pore pressure', the pressure of the groundwater, could gradually weaken the underlying rock and make slippage more likely.

This was an inconvenient truth for anyone wanting to build a reservoir, which may have contributed to the time taken to officially recognise the danger. Reservoir-induced seismicity or RIS is now an established issue, and areas are surveyed for risk before a new reservoir can be built. Later research found that large oil wells also affected seismic activity. Pumping out millions of tons of oil and replacing it with water affected both the load and the pore pressure, sometimes leading to more earthquakes.

Given this background, it was not surprising that critics were worried by the possible effects of fracking for shale gas. This involves pumping a mixture of water and sand laced with chemicals underground at high pressure to crack the bedrock, allowing deposits of gas, or sometimes oil, to seep out. The scale is tiny compared to a reservoir and Cuadrilla, the company involved in fracking tests in the UK, suggested any earth tremors would be barely noticeable. "Local people should be

reassured that any resulting ground motion will be far below anything that could cause harm or damage and is likely to be much less than caused by other industries such as quarrying or construction or even heavy goods vehicles travelling on our roads," states the company's websites. They claimed most activity would only be detectable thanks to special seismometers set in Lancashire where the tests were taking place.

In 2011, fracking in England was temporarily halted after a magnitude 1.1 tremor. Things really ratcheted up a level with a 2.9 quake in August 2019. "The walls of my house shook," a local resident in Lytham St Anne's told the BBC. "For a moment,

I really thought my house was going to fall down."

Cuadrilla pointed out that the event only lasted a second and the shaking was below the level permitted for construction work. However, a subsequent report in November 2019 by the independent Oil and Gas Authority concluded that it was not possible to predict the size of tremors caused by fracking. This was enough for the government to drop its support of what was originally seen as a "huge opportunity" for the UK, and impose an indefinite fracking ban. This may look like an overreaction. The US has seen widespread fracking for years, and they have not suffered an epidemic of earthquakes. Or have they?

From 1973 to 2008, the US experienced an average of 24 quakes of magnitude 3 and above each year. From 2009 to 2014, the number shot up to 193 a year, an eightfold increase. The US Geological Survey now accepts that fracking is occasionally associated with earthquakes, and in 2019 the Seismological Society of America identified some 600 small quakes that could be tied to fracking.

The US is far more sparsely populated than the UK, with fracking taking place well away from population centres. While there has been no shortage of local protests, there are not enough votes to change matters. The current administration is keen to make the most of American oil and gas. Meanwhile, further research is under way to find out more about the interaction between seismic activity and fracking, and whether the effects can be predicted. The key question is of course whether it can ever be truly safe. Mother Nature is someone you really don't want to irritate.

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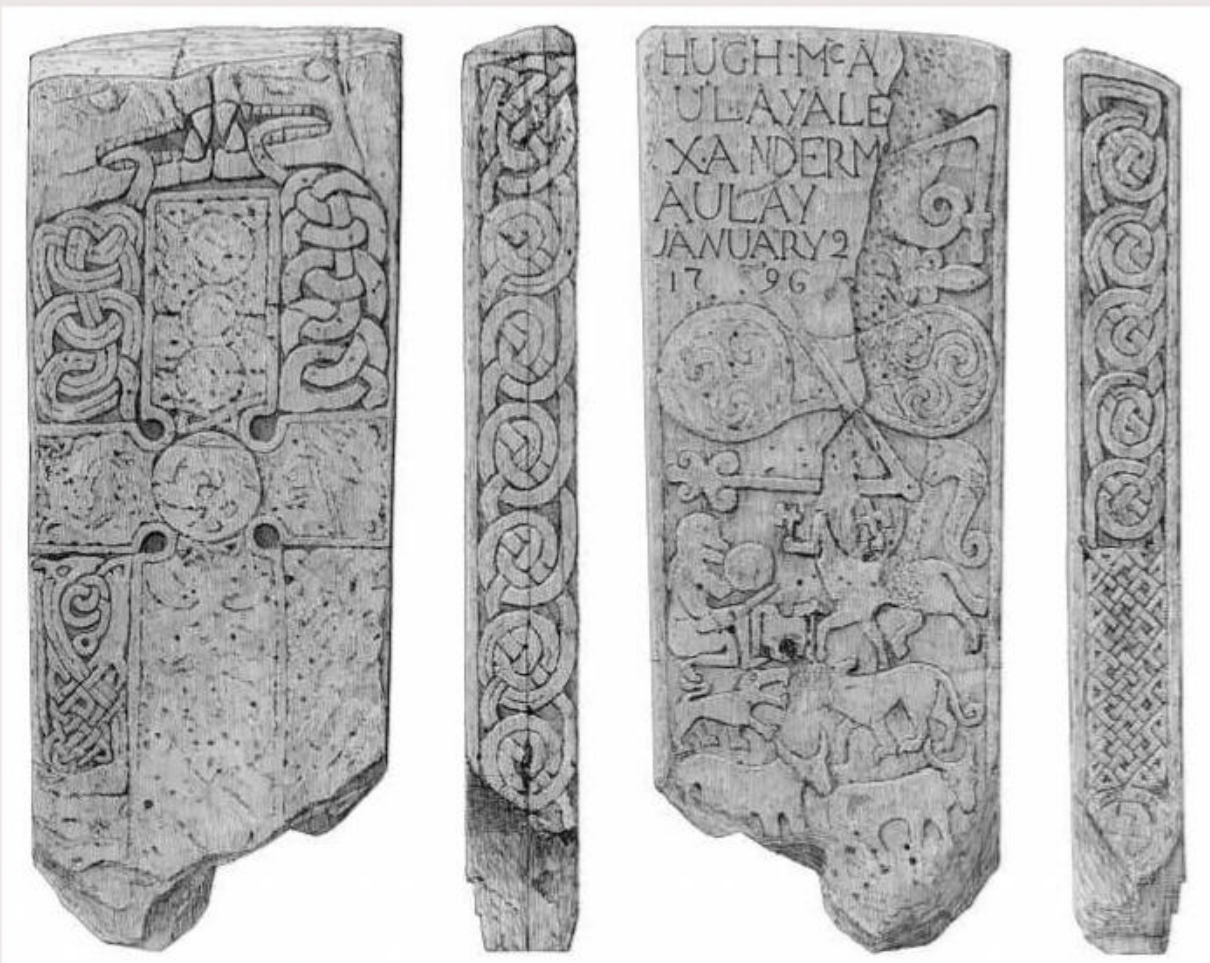


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PAUL SIEVEKING reports on discoveries from Scotland, including some unique Pictish carvings



LEFT: Drawing showing both sides of the 1,200-year-old megalith, which had been reused as a gravestone in the 18th century (hence the 1796 inscription).

BELOW LEFT: Dragons and a cross on the reverse.

BELOW: Remains of a Pictish woman at Tarradale.



In September, on the last day of a two-week dig, site supervisor Steve Birch found some blackened patches in a grave he had been excavating and came upon the remains of a Pictish woman. “I was able to identify the spinal column with individual vertebrae, and then moving up the body I uncovered the upper arms and shoulders, all of which were just black stains in the ground,” he said. “Moving carefully higher up, I was able to locate the skull, which is better preserved – although it had partly collapsed in on itself.” Mr Birch also found legs and feet, which appear to have been bound together before burial. The whole body was surrounded by the “faint shadow” of a coffin. *BBC News*, 11+24 Sept, 18 Oct; *Dundee Courier & Advertiser*, 25 Sept 2019.

SIX-HEADED BURIAL

The remains of two 15th century warriors in their 40s have been found on top of each other in a single coffin under Tarbat Old Parish Church in Portmahomack, Easter Ross, in the Scottish Highlands. One of them died from brutal sword injuries that removed the bottom half of his face; the second had both blade and blunt force injuries. Placed around them were four other human skulls. “It’s not like anything that’s been found in Scotland or anywhere else in Britain,” said archaeologist Cecily Spall. The church is thought to be the site of a bloody clash between Clan Ross and Clan Mackay that ended with survivors hiding in the church in the 1480s and being burnt alive in it. More than 170 skeletons, including those of 40 children, were found under the church and in the graveyard. The site was first occupied in the sixth and seventh centuries when the land was used as a Pictish farmstead. It then became an important Pictish monastery, destroyed in a Viking raid around AD 800, before being rebuilt. *D.Express*, *Metro*, 5 Sept 2019.

PICTISH NEWS

A 1,200-year-old fallen megalith, found last August by archaeologist Anne MacInnes, has revealed an exciting Pictish carving. The stone lay half buried and covered in undergrowth at an early Christian church site near Dingwall in the Scottish Highlands, and had been reused as a gravestone in 1796. It measures just over a metre, but would probably have been more than 6ft (2m) tall originally. One side shows a number of Pictish designs including several mythical beasts, oxen, an animal-headed warrior with sword and shield – plus a double disc and a z rod. The side hidden from view depicts a cross between fanged beasts. John Borland, of Historic Environment Scotland and President of the Pictish Arts Society, said: “The two massive beasts that flank and surmount the cross are quite unlike anything found on any other Pictish stone.” The stone is one of only about 50 Pictish cross-slabs of its kind known to exist. *BBC News*, 23 Aug, 14 Oct 2019.

- Six miles (10km) from Dingwall, on the Black Isle at Tarradale near Muir of Ord, one of the largest recorded Pictish barrow cemeteries – thought to be about 1,400 years old – is being excavated. There are a number of square and round burial mounds, and enclosures ranging in diameter from about 8m (26ft) to more than 40m (131ft). A harpoon and axes dating back 6,000 years to the Mesolithic had previously been found on the site.





CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

243: THE GREAT CLASSICAL BAKE-OFF

(Dedicated to wife Janet's Victoria Sponges)

'If I knew you were coming' I'd have baked a cake' – Eileen Barton/Gloria Gibbs, 1950

Fort may have gleaned something about this from "the girls in the kitchen who spoke fluent Latin", from whom "we picked up a little Latin ourselves" (*Autobiography*, ed. Mr X, online). He later (p34) mentions, "We'd do detective work to catch the other kid stealing cake, so that we could tell." For more Fort-cake stories, see Jim Steinmeyer's biography, p45.

Courtesy of ancient Egypt via Apicius to Delia Smith we have a veritable cakewalk. The Great British Bake-Off dossier highlights several untoward incidents, notably the (in)famous 'Bingate' episode.

Can't compare, though, for exoticism, with Egyptian crocodile snack-times. Both Herodotus (bk2 ch69) and Strabo (bk17 ch38) say the creatures were considered sacred and fed with 'leftovers' – in the GBB they apparently go first to the contestants, then camera-crew.

One of the c. 25,000 papyri found (early 20th-century) along with thousands of croc-mummies at Tetubnis (Fayum, Lower Egypt) records "the customary cake for Petesouchos and the crocodile." Best to keep this reptilian god (properly, Sobek) happy, given his self-description in this Pyramid Text: "I am Sobek. I eat with my mouth. I urinate and copulate with my penis. I am lord of semen, who takes women from their husbands to the place I like according to my fancy." Shades of *The Creature From The Black Lagoon*...

Strabo (tourists were allowed to help the priests – imagine the selfies) provides this eyewitness description: "We went to the lake carrying from our dinner a kind of cake plus some roasted meat and honey-mixed wine. The priests went up to the animal, some of them opened its jaws, others put in the cake and the meat and poured the wine down its throat. It swam off across the lake, but came back to have the priests feed it the food another visitor had brought."

Transfer this rigmarole to the GBB studio? The mind boggles... Not so in Green Island, Australia, where (2015) crocodile Cassius's 112th birthday was celebrated with balloons and a chicken

cake – see relevant websites. More on this in Michael Molcho's article (online) in the *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 100 (2014), 181-93. While on Egypt, our word 'pyramid' perpetuates a slang term from the Greek 'pyramis', a multi-ingredient honey-cake, one being 'Zeus's brain' – compare online recipes for 'Zombie Brain Cake'.

The Romans also mocked "the giant useless pyramids" – bit rich coming from them. Obvious modern comparison is 'The Gherkin' – equally applicable to Tony Blair. Same goes for our 'obelisks', wrongly dubbed 'Cleopatra's Needles' – Greek word originally meant a roasting-spit. The Egyptian *Rhind Mathematical Papyrus* measures a pyramid's height 'Up from the crack' – the builder's one?

It was apparently assumed that Græco-Roman gods had a sweet tooth. Julius Pollux (2nd-century AD grammarian), *Onomasticon*, bk6 chs16-7) has a recipe for the honey cakes offered by Cretans to Ariadne, Mistress of the Labyrinth – they were cut into various shapes, including penises – see later for such erotic recurrences. A similar one is included for Romans in his description of placatory rituals by Cato the Elder, *On Agriculture*, chs75-6 – its Greek-derived name Placenta is *not* the kind dealt with weekly on *Call the Midwife*. More on this in Fay Glinister's online essay 'Festus [2nd century Roman grammarian] and Ritual Foodstuffs'.

Pompeian pictures attest Roman delight in cakes. So does Ovid's (*Tristia*, bk4 no.10 v12) mention of the two birthday cakes made for him and elder brother (born on same day). Apicius's Roman cookbook (a late compilation – various online translations) includes about a dozen cake recipes in his Book 7 (subtitled 'The Gourmet') ch13. Most of them are sprinkled with pepper – see Paul Waumsley's website for his re-creation of the Pepper & Nut Cake. One, 'a Recipe with Cheese' is praised by editor-translators Barbara Flower & Elizabeth Rosenbaum as 'making a very good custard' – remember Lionel's passion for custard tarts in *As Time Goes By*...

Athenæus (*Learned Men at Dinner*, bk14 paras645a-648a) has a huge Græco-Roman medley of cookbooks, authors, cake names, and slaving, sometimes exotic/erotic descriptions, notably

confections shaped like female breasts and genitals – no doubt washed down with wine drunk from the phallic-shaped goblets dear to Roman taste. He also mentions a village called 'Flat-Cake', and an anecdote in which Socrates brings home a flat cake, seized and crumbled by his famously shrewish wife Xanthippe, prompting him to remark, "Well, nothing left for you, either" – Socrates is elsewhere seen as a connoisseur of women's mammaries.

I suppose we might see the penile goblets as cocktail glasses. Alan Bennett says that his parents always pronounced them cock-TAIL (from prudery?). Compare Elton John's phallic-shaped soap dispenser.

No British classical essay can leave out the ubiquitous Mary Beard. In cause here is her *Times* blog (19 Nov 2019) on Christmas cakes, observing Delia's 'vagueness' about baking times (same applies, for more obvious reasons, to Apicius). Beard ends by admitting she'll not have time to eat the thing, but not to worry, she came across bits of a two-year-old one that still tasted "jolly nice" – an autobiographical Fort sentence reads: "We wrapped the cake in a piece of paper to keep always."

Something else one can't leave out is 'Let Them Eat Cake'. This Maggie Smith *Downton Abbey*-style zinger's traditional attribution to Marie Antoinette is nowadays widely disbelieved. Before her (1765), Rousseau (*Confessions*, bk6) had credited it to an unnamed 'great princess', probably Marie Thérèse, wife of Louis XIV. Its first ascription to Marie Antoinette came in the 1843 journal *Les Guêpes* (Wasps) from Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Marr, traceable to revolutionary anti-royal propaganda – she was treated with exceptional cruelty during imprisonment and execution.

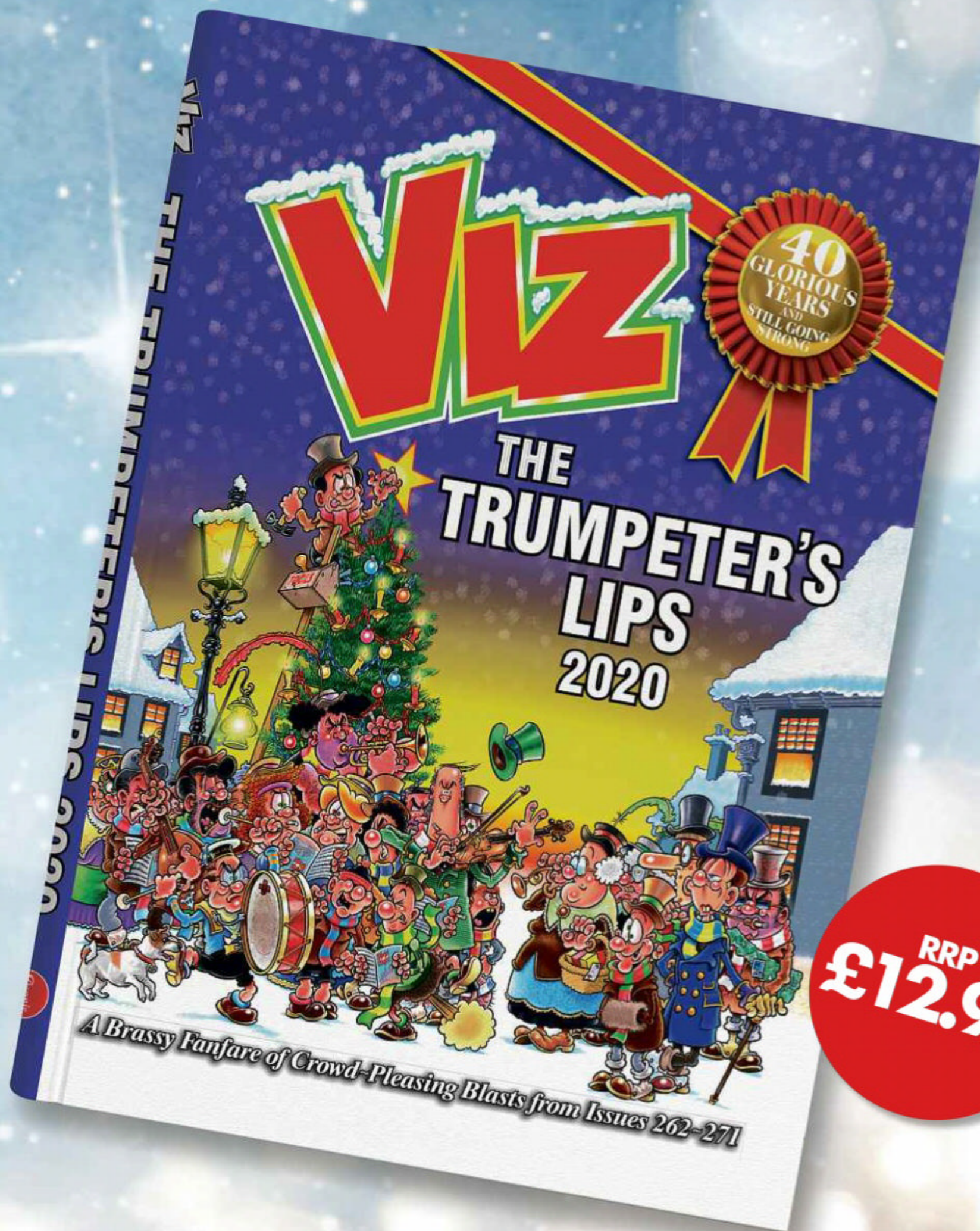
So, should we let all this go through Jo Brand's *Cakehole*? No, perhaps a classier classical finale is in order. Along with Robert Scott, Henry Liddell was joint-compiler of their still authoritative *Greek Lexicon*, spawning a host of prose/verse jests, such as 'A Liddell Learning is a Dangerous Thing'. An undergraduate penned a satirical play (for which he was sent down), *Cakeless*, ridiculing Mrs Liddell's failure to marry off their daughters. You know one of these better as the real-life Alice in Wonderland.

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Murder in the Cathedral

ALAN MURDIE goes on a pilgrimage to Canterbury in search of the ghost of St Thomas Becket

The year 2020 marks the 850th anniversary of the murder of Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury. On the 29 December 1170, on the steps of the altar of Canterbury Cathedral, blows from swords wielded by an assassination squad comprising four knights extinguished the earthly life of Becket. The killers who hacked him down had taken their lead from the words of Henry II, who had famously declared: "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" Providing a prime example of a lesson humanity continues to learn, that rash words uttered by powerful men may turn murderous, Becket's death was the bloody culmination of a long quarrel between the monarch and his archbishop over the rights of the Church.

Religious veneration and cultural events commemorating Becket's martyrdom are scheduled throughout 2020. Anticipating that at some point someone will ask if the ghost of Becket ever returns, I offer the following contribution.

Swiftly achieving sainthood within three years, Becket became St Thomas of Canterbury, credited with making a number of apparitional appearances and generating a wealth of supernatural stories. Spectral figures representing one or more of the shades of his assassins – Reginald Fitzurse (their leader), Richard le Breton, William de Tracy, and Hugh de Morville – also reputedly return, although with one exception they are not individually identified, popular tradition having forgotten their names.

Supernatural incidents reputedly began almost immediately after Becket was struck down. As the escaping knights fled the scene and departed into the night, several of the laity present in the cathedral knelt and used cloths to soak up the congealing blood on the flagstones. One man took his soaked cloth home to his sick wife, who was instantly cured. Similar claims followed in the next few days. It signalled the beginning of an international reputation for miraculous healing which endures to this day.

The first sign of Becket's post-mortem survival manifested just hours after his murder, according to one tale. In the course of their hurried flight, the assassins stopped at a house in South Malling, East Sussex, which belonged to Becket, in order to rest. Laying their swords upon a table, they witnessed their blades swept to the floor by unseen hands. Placing their weapons on the table a second time,

the phenomenon was soon repeated. Traditionally, this table is one of marble, preserved at Anne of Cleves House, at Lewes, Sussex. It is said that on the night of 29 December each year, this table moves of its own volition, rocking, gyrating and sliding around in the manner of a levitating table at a Spiritualist séance. Nonetheless, I suspect that (as with the haunted picture in the story of 'The Mezzotint' by MR James) "though carefully watched", the table has never been seen to independently alter its position again. Furthermore, the distance between Canterbury and South Malling (96

miles/154km) would have taken a journey of several days to complete on horseback in winter, calling into question the time and dating of the incident and its alleged anniversary and re-enactment (alterations in the calendar notwithstanding).

A more likely sequence of events is that immediately after the murder the knights scattered and headed in different directions to evade pursuit. This makes better sense, and also matches another ghost story concerning Sir William de Tracy who reputedly headed towards Dover, seeking a passage to France. The route taken by de Tracy avoided the main highway, following a



ABOVE: An unusual image of a praying St Thomas Becket with an assassin's sword cleaving his skull.



LEFT: Becket is murdered in Canterbury Cathedral by the four knights: Hugh de Morville, William de Tracy, Reginald Fitzurse and Richard le Breton. **ABOVE:** The 'miraculous table' in Anne of Cleves House, said to move of its own volition on the night of 29 December.

path skirting around the village of Bridge.

Sections of this ancient path still exist. According to G Weaver in *Kent Ghosts* (1977), "Walkers along this path have reported being bowled over by an unseen horseman galloping wildly past, while others have claimed to hear the thud of galloping hooves and neighing of a horse spurred to the limits of its power." People walking dogs have "seen their pets cowering away from something they can neither see nor feel". Weaver ascribes these to the ghost of de Tracy, doomed to re-enact his hurried flight.

Another of the guilty knights (unidentified) is said to annually haunt the approaches to South Leigh church in Oxfordshire. Tradition avers he paused in his flight at the church seeking absolution, but was rebuffed by the priest and so rode away. On the anniversary of this event "a galloping horse is heard approaching the church and then departing". Again, the distance between Canterbury and South Leigh makes it impossible for any of the knights to have arrived on horseback for several days, so any precise anniversary re-enactment cannot be upon 29 December, but would be expected in early January (again, changes in the calendar notwithstanding).

Yet another variant of the ghostly galloping knight on horseback theme concerns Kemsing, near Sevenoaks in Kent. This is in the form of a phantom prequel. Once a year, again on 29 December, a ghostly knight rides up to St Mary's church, enters the building and approaches the altar to pray before vanishing. Tradition does not record which of the knights the shade represents, but in local legend all four knights rode through Kemsing on their way to Canterbury to kill Becket. (See 'The Murderers of St Thomas a Becket' in *Popular Tradition* (1932) by Tancred Borenius, *Folklore* vol.43, pp.175-192).

Becket's own apparition was soon

Also recorded were instances of St Thomas expelling demons from possessed lunatics

reported after his death, encouraging the growth of his posthumous cult and reputation for working wonders, with more than 700 miracles attributed to him. These sealed his reputation for sanctity, leading to the formal establishment of his tomb as the leading English destination for pilgrims. Even before canonisation, there are estimated to have been 100,000 visitors in 1171 alone. Some pilgrims treated pilgrimage to Canterbury as a kind of mediæval holiday excursion (immortalised in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*), but the numbers were swollen by those desperately seeking cures for a wide range of deformities, maladies and afflictions. Poor women, widows and the sick were particularly blessed.

Details describing many of these early cures were logged by two monks, Benedict of Peterborough and William of Canterbury. Also recorded were instances of St Thomas expelling demons from possessed lunatics (a window at Canterbury Cathedral depicts a possessed man being hauled to the shrine by two attendants, one of whom beats him on his way; see over the page) and, on a more mundane level, aiding in finding lost items.

On occasion, cases of miraculous healing were accompanied by spectacular visionary appearances of the shining spirit of St Thomas, often occurring at critical emotion-laden moments for the witnesses. As well as credited with achieving profound

physiological changes in the bodies of sick pilgrims and relieving painful symptoms, such appearances had the effect of reinvigorating personal faith and religiosity and achieving wholesale transformations of character.

These transcendent appearances continued for more than a century in many different places and were not confined to the faithful. For example, a privileged and impious young student, the son of a titled family from Yorkshire and "much given to mirth and sport", was dismissive about the prospect of visiting Becket's tomb with his family. At this, he suffered a total paralysis of his right arm, losing all sensitivity in the limb, and curtailing his activities as a scholar. This was interpreted as a punishment for flippant scepticism. However, his arm was fully restored after the youth underwent a redemptive vision of St Thomas. Further communications ensued in which he conversed directly with the saint accompanied by a brilliant light of "marvellous splendour" which illuminated the entire house. This wonderful glow was witnessed by his astonished parents – though they did not share the vision of the saint himself. Thus, personally counselled and healed by St Thomas, the formerly sceptical youth changed his path in life, taking holy orders and entering Fountains Abbey as a monk.

These visions might be ascribed to dreams or hallucinations, and regarding the wondrous light Edwin Abbot in his *St Thomas of Canterbury his death and miracles* (1898) proposed that "a sudden outburst of moonlight through dark clouds might very well impress the excited parents – hearing their son converse in the dark with an invisible Saint – as though it were a flood of miraculously celestial light". But, separated as we are from events, it is impossible to say, or to reach any



GHOSTWATCH

meaningful verdict on many other such stories.

The wide geographical spread of these apparitions is unsurprising. Beyond Canterbury, in time, almost every church in England probably contained some image of St Thomas until the campaign waged to suppress his cult by Henry VIII, for whom it provided apt and uncomfortable parallels to his own strife with the Church.

By this time, the shrine was covered in precious jewels donated by pilgrims, including Louis XI of France. At the Reformation, 26 cartloads of treasure were removed from the shrine and Becket's tomb prised open. This action did not lead to any ghostly appearances and little would have been found, as long before his corporeal remains had been dismembered by the Church itself. Centuries before, clerics had instigated a 'dice-and-splice' policy with the bones to maximise the creation of potent relics. This reflected the view of the mediæval Church that the miraculous power of saints remained concentrated in the separated parts of a body as much as the whole, allowing for widespread dispersal of fragments. A few bones were retained by Simon Langton, Archdeacon between 1227 and 1248, for distribution to kings and nobles, and

traces of the blood of St Thomas were mixed with water in phials for sale. Dilution did not diminish the efficacy of this fluid, revealing thinking which is in some ways mirrored in the principles of homeopathy (see also *The Saint at the Stake* (1964) by MD Anderson).

St Thomas's ghost angrily knocked down the walls then under construction



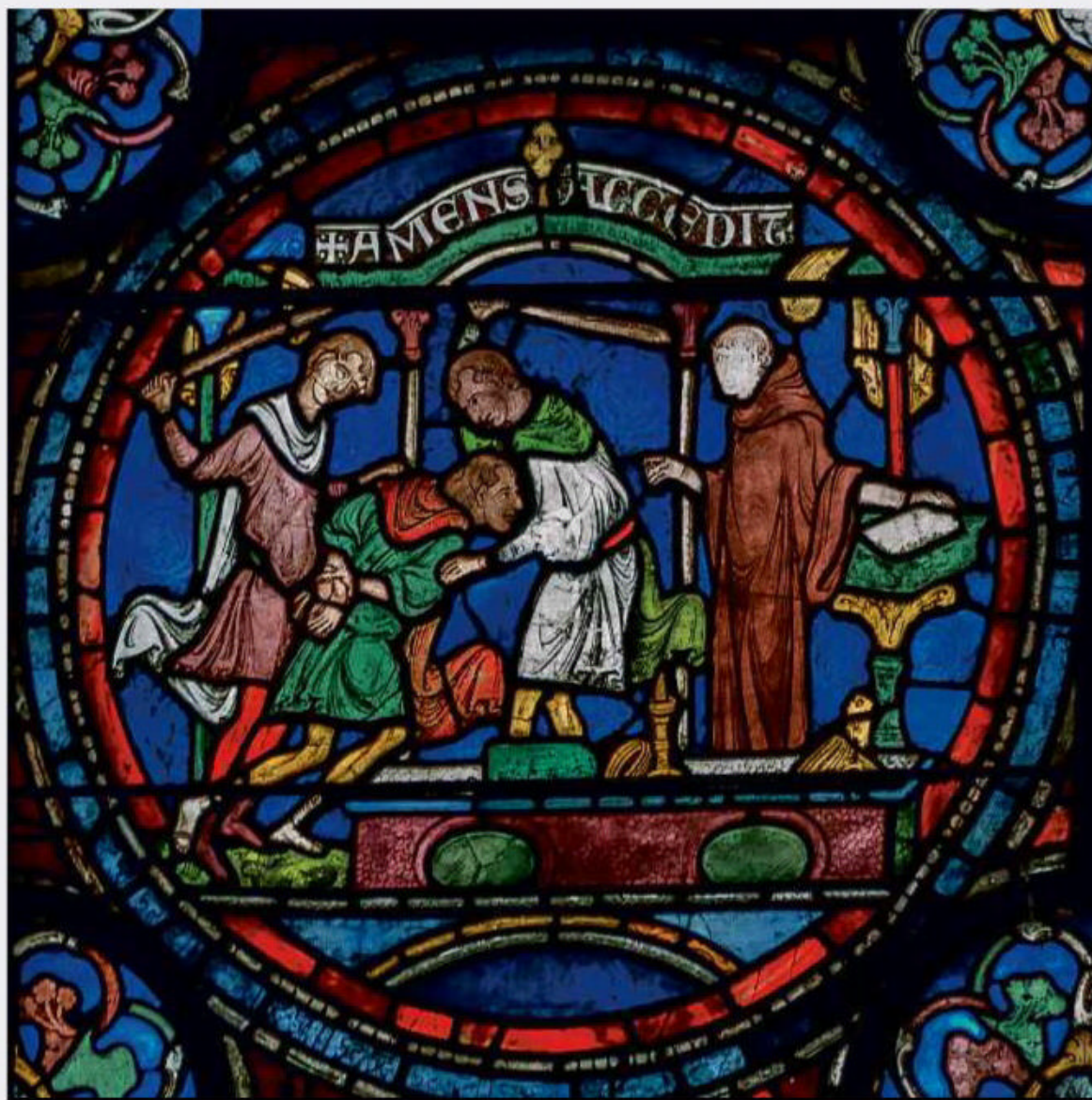
If this seems strange, ludicrous or extreme, we should consider the manias for acquiring the relics of celebrities, pop stars and historical figures profitably flourishing in the world we inhabit today. Many will enthusiastically collect their images, cast-offs and ephemera, right down to their hair and traces of their bodily fluids. Such items are eagerly snapped up by collectors, often fetching high prices. Exemplifying the modern fascination for supernatural relics, the *Daily Mail* (27 Oct 2019) revealed how a "haunted 16-inch doll" with empty eye sockets and proclaimed to possess "supernatural paranormal power" sold on eBay for \$5,600. The same source cites a "vintage haunted plush teddy bear" reaching \$560 after 46 bids, another for sale at \$168.99, along with "haunted bones" (\$39.00) and "demon ash" (\$10.00).

Perhaps the most awesome manifestation of the saint, distinctly showing the physical quality of many mediæval revenants, was his display at the Tower of London in 1140. Here his ghost angrily knocked down walls then under construction, greatly vexing Henry III, though the monarch had been guiltless of any part in his death. A localised earthquake or foundations sinking in the treacherous Thames mud might be more probable, but in being blamed for demolishing walls, St Thomas effectively established himself as the first of many ghosts recorded at the Tower (see *Ghosts of London*, 1982, by JA Brooks).

Yet, surprisingly, there appears to be no established tradition of the ghost of St Thomas haunting Canterbury Cathedral itself, nor for much in the way of any hauntings within its precincts at all. Andrew Green in *Haunted Kent Today* (1999) noted a 'dearth' of modern hauntings at the Cathedral and across the wider city. True, there are markings resembling a cowed figure on a pillar in the Cathedral Crypt known as "Becket's Ghost", but it is thought most likely to be a faded painting of Christ, a saint or a king in appropriate garb.

Traditionally, it is another Archbishop, Simon of Sudbury, who died at the hands of a mob in the Peasant's Revolt against the poll tax in 1381, that reputedly haunts the Cathedral where his torso is interred, though he has not been sighted for at least 50 years. His ghost also supposedly wanders St Gregory's Church in Sudbury, Suffolk, which holds his skull.

What may have been a ghostly time-slip echo of mediæval devotions to St Thomas was experienced in autumn 1939 by a Mr and Mrs Dawson, who had lived immediately opposite the Archbishop's Palace, and were interviewed by Joan Forman for her book *The Haunted*



TOP: A pilgrim's badge of Becket's shrine at Canterbury. **ABOVE:** Mad Henry of Fordwich is shown being dragged to St Thomas's tomb in one of the Trinity Chapel windows at Canterbury Cathedral.



ABOVE LEFT: The Dark Entry at Canterbury Cathedral – a bit spooky, but the site of a merely fictional haunting. **ABOVE RIGHT:** An old postcard showing ‘Becket’s Ghost’ on a pillar in the Cathedral’s crypt. The ghostly image is probably the faded traces of a painting of Christ or one of the saints.

South (1978). Passing through the Cathedral grounds late one evening, they simultaneously became aware of a strange atmosphere, a silvery light, and noticed that the Crypt windows “glittered as bright as real diamonds”. Both then heard “unaccompanied chanting coming from the locked up and empty cathedral crypt”. The light again may be ascribed to moonlight, but the sounds are harder to explain.

Otherwise, only feelings of a presence in parts of the Canterbury Tales Visitor Attraction in St Margaret’s Street and a portion of the crypt have been reported. Stories of a ghostly serving girl called Nell Cook (whom it is fatal to encounter) haunting the area are a fiction from the pen of Richard Harris Barham in his *Ingoldsby Legends*, first published in 1837. As the reader will appreciate, these are vastly different from the physically powerful manifestations displayed by St Thomas prior to the Reformation.

According to popular tradition, the only remaining British haunting featuring Becket takes place in the village of Lapford in Devon. Here he makes an annual ride to confront William de Tracy, who as the local baron founded the church at nearby Nymet Tracy. This ghostly ride occurs on 27 December each year, two days ahead of the anniversary of his martyrdom. As Paul Gater comments in *The Secret Life of Ghosts* (2013): “Why he appears on that particular night, instead of 29 December, the anniversary of his murder in Canterbury Cathedral, is another puzzle of the spirit world.” And why should Becket be riding a horse, when freed from the boundaries of time and space he could materialise anywhere, as the miracles attest?

My proposal is that the explanation lies in events in the run-up to his murder, the clue being provided by the very fact St Thomas is astride his horse and heading for a spectral show-down.

In the days before the assassination, members of the Broc family left Saltwood Castle and raided the parkland of Becket’s estate at Canterbury, killing deer and stealing his hunting dogs and horse. Robert de Broc had been granted the administration of Becket’s estate in his dispute with Henry II, and on Christmas Eve, Robert (or possibly his nephew) cut off the tail of Becket’s horse and paraded the animal before its owner at Canterbury.

Becket is supposed to have contemptuously disdained this attempt to insult him, declaring himself unmoved, but he notably announced the excommunication of de Broc at the solemn Christmas Day Mass the next day. Three days later the four knights coming to slay Becket met up at Saltwood Castle, and de Broc accompanied them to the Cathedral, though not participating in the killing. Stemming from this involvement, there exists in Kent folklore a legend that St Thomas wrought vengeance upon the descendants of Robert de Broc, who were cursed by being born with tails appended thereafter. A later version of this story extends this unique punishment to the entire population of Strood, on the grounds that its townsmen had sided with the king against him and were also implicated in docking the tail of Becket’s horse when he visited the town.

The significance of tail-docking is discussed in an interesting article by historian Andrew G Miller entitled ‘Tails

of Masculinity: Knights, Clerics and the Mutilation of Horses in Medieval England’ in *Speculum* (2013) vol.88, pp.958-995. Miller explains: “By terrorising Becket’s deer, dogs and horse, the Broc family and their supporters waged symbolic war against the archbishop via his living possessions, targeting the very creatures that represented Becket’s secular – and masculine – presence and influence as arch-diocesan overlord.”

The practice that Miller highlights turns out to be widespread throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. To cut off the tail of a horse was seen as a calculated insult towards its master. A fine horse conferred status and authority, and thus the docking of its tail was perceived as a form of defamation and public ridicule, the equivalent of vandalising the car of someone today, as an insult and act of intimidation. In England, it was also considered a means of delivering a menacing warning.

Miller proposes the mutilation of the horse “may also be interpreted as a kind of bloody enfeeblement – or figurative castration”. If so, my suggested interpretation and solution is that by openly appearing riding his spectral horse, two days ahead of the actual anniversary of his martyrdom, Becket’s ghost is engaged in a symbolic act of ghostly defiance, re-asserting his masculine pride and power. Undaunted by the attack on his horse or the threat to his life, he seeks to confront one of the murderers who will shortly kill him. Rather than fearing his impending martyrdom, he rides triumphantly to embrace it and his elevation to glory.

WE HAVE LIFT-OFF | Ordinary men and women tap into their superhuman powers to rescue people trapped under cars and fallen trees

• On Saturday, 21 September 2019, Zac Clark, 16, and his mother Laura were in their front yard in Butler, Ohio, working on the flower beds when they heard a female neighbour call for help. They both ran to the house, where they saw the woman's husband pinned underneath their Volkswagen Passat. "I guess the jack broke or slipped," said Zac, "and the car fell on top of him from the waist up." Zac positioned himself at the front of the car, near the hood, and managed to lift it long enough for Laura and the neighbour's wife to pull the unnamed 39-year-old from underneath. "He had a couple of cracked ribs and his face was messed up pretty bad, but the doctors told him if I wasn't there then he'd be dead," said Zac. "I just thank God for putting me in the position and giving me the strength to do that." [CNN] 26 Sept 2019.

• In situations of extreme danger, the body releases adrenaline, leading to increased blood flow, a heightened pulse rate, extra reserves of determination and increased physical performance – or so it was believed until recently. A series of studies – published in the journal *Cell Metabolism* – indicate the "adrenaline rush" is a medical myth. What triggers the bodily changes is a hormone called osteocalcin produced by the bones. This helps explain why younger humans, with healthier bones, have a more acute stress response. *D.Telegraph*, 13 Sept 2019.

• On 24 February 2002, Richard Stilwell was under his Dodge Ram van in Bow, New Hampshire, fixing the transmission when it popped out of park gear. The five-ton vehicle fell on him, pinning his whole body underneath. He screamed to his wife inside the house for help. Initially, she jumped in the van, started it up and tried to move it off his body, but this only made the situation worse, so she got out and lifted the van off her



ABOVE: Lindsay Wagner appears to lift a Mini above her head during a visit to Britain to promote the TV series *The Bionic Woman* in 1976.

husband with her bare hands. Donna Stilwell was 5ft 2in (157cm) tall and weighed 115lb (52kg). "She has wrist problems and has a hard time moving a coffee table," said her husband. "She can't even shovel for four minutes." He sustained a broken arm and internal bruising, but it could have been a lot worse if not for his wife's timely intervention. *Boston Metro*, 1-3 Mar 2002.

• On 5 November 2006, Royal Marine Mark Farr, 29, was in Gereshk – in the Sangin Valley in southern Afghanistan – driving a two-ton Pinzgauer truck when a mortar bomb exploded nearby, flipping the truck into a water-filled ditch, trapping his legs and pinning him under 3ft (90cm) of water.

He was seconds from drowning when Colour Sergeant Carl 'Tatts' Tatton, 38, braved Taliban mortar fire to lift the vehicle off his comrade, although it was 13 times his body weight. Another soldier pulled Marine Farr to safety. *D.Mail*, *D.Express*, *Metro*, 4 Oct 2007.

• Nick Harris somehow found the strength to lift a car off six-year-old Ashlyn Hough in Ottawa, Kansas, in December 2009. He was dropping off his eight-year-old daughter at school when he saw a driver backing her car out of a driveway and over the child. "I didn't even think," he said. "I ran over there as fast as I could, grabbed the rear end of the car and lifted and pushed as hard as I could to get the tyre off the child."

Harris, 32 – 5ft 7in (170cm) and 185lb (84kg) – said he didn't know how he managed to lift the Mercury sedan off the child. He said he tried later that day to lift other cars and couldn't. "But somehow, adrenaline, hand of God, whatever you want to call it, I don't know how I did it," he said. Kristen Hough said her daughter was released from the hospital that afternoon with a concussion and some scrapes. "[Nick Harris] truly is a superhero in the family's eyes," she said. [AP] 18 Dec 2009.

• Ed Wells, 53, was trapped for 40 minutes when a 25ft (7.6m) tree fell on him in his garden in May Hill, Gloucestershire. His wife Melanie managed to slide the trunk above his chest just enough so he could breathe, before sons Jack (19) and Toby (17) arrived to help paramedic Colin Apps manhandle it clear. "I don't know how my mum shifted it on her own," said Jack. "It was too heavy for us before we sawed off branches – and even then it was a struggle." Mr Wells was airlifted to hospital with a fractured vertebra. *D.Mirror*, 24 Dec 2009.

• On 28 July 2012, Alec Kornacki was in the family garage in Glen Allen, Virginia, working on a BMW 525i when the jack slipped and the 1.5-ton car fell on top of him. His daughter Lauren, 22, found him pinned to the ground and unresponsive. "She proceeded to lift up the car, pull him out and then give him CPR," said her sister Kristen. (Fortuitously, she had worked as a lifeguard.) Mr Kornacki was treated at the Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center. He had several broken ribs, some numbness and other fractures, but suffered no permanent damage. *WWBT NBC12*, 31 July; [CNN] 1 Aug 2012.

• In April 2013, a driver in his 20s was flung from his car and pinned under the engine after it hit a lamppost and wall at 1.30am in Coseley, West

Midlands. Dale Crowley – 5ft 6in (1.7m) and 154lb (70kg) – rushed out to help in his pyjamas, lifted the Peugeot to free the driver and even shoved the one-ton vehicle 3ft (90cm) out of the way. The driver was hospitalised with serious injuries. *Sun*, 17 April 2013.

• Bob Renning, 52, saved a driver from a burning SUV on a freeway in Minnesota by bending the door with his bare hands. State Trooper Zachary Hill said he had shown “superhuman strength”, adding: “I don’t think I could take a crowbar and fold the door like he did.” Renning, a member of the US National Guard, told the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* he was not sure how he bent the door open far enough to shatter the window glass. He had sprinted towards the vehicle as he saw flames and smoke “rolling around” inside. His girlfriend called 911. After he realised the vehicle was locked and the windows would not work, he gripped the top of the doorframe with his fingers, braced his foot against the door and pulled.

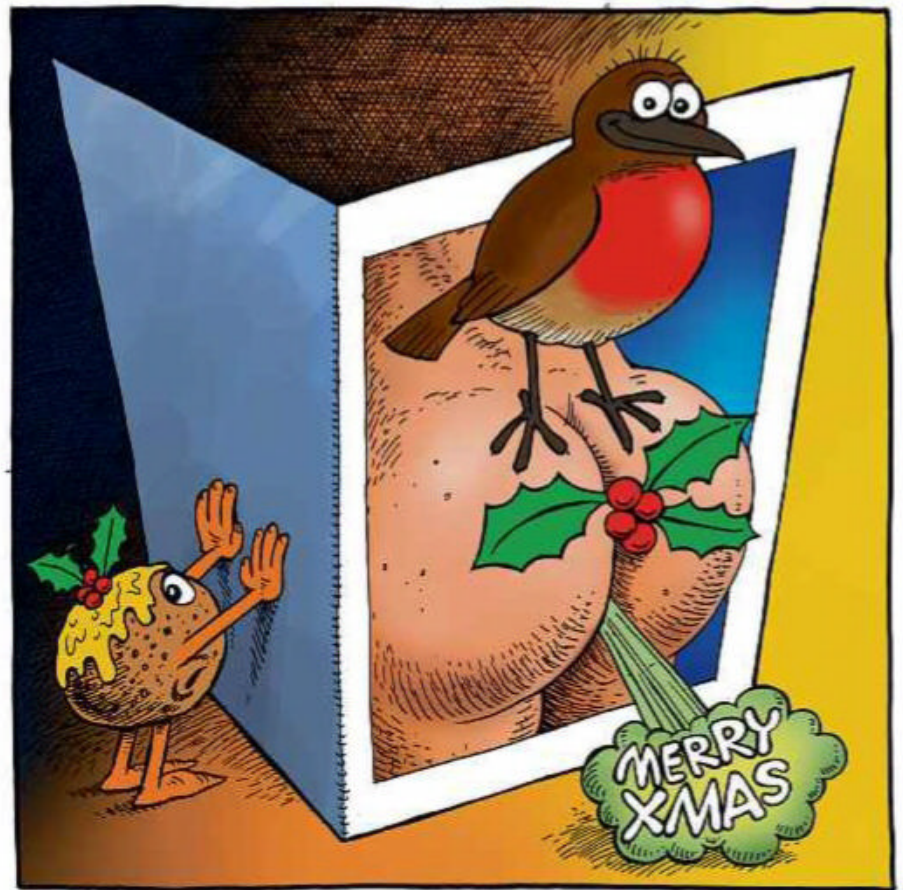
The driver, Michael Johannes, suffered minor smoke inhalation and light cuts from being pulled through the shattered window. “Thirty seconds later and I would have been done,” he said. *BBC News*, 2 July; *D.Express*, 4 July 2014.

• On 30 July 2017, Stephen Parker was working on a Toyota Prius in his backyard in Sugar City, Utah, with his sons JT (8) and Mason (17). He jacked up the car and slid underneath to take the axles off. One came off easily, but the other one was stubborn. He went to adjust the axle and move the jack, but the car fell on him. Mason had gone into the house minutes earlier after cutting his hand so it was left to the eight-year-old to save the day.

“I yelled to JT on the other side of the car, ‘Jack it up quick!’,” said Mr Parker. “I couldn’t move at all. I was totally trapped, and then I passed out. It was all in his hands and I thought, ‘This is it. There’s no way he can jack up this car because it took my 17-year-old son and I both to jack it up the first time.’” JT, who weighed a mere 50lb (23kg), adjusted the jack and jumped up and down on the handle for 15 minutes as the car slowly rose off his father. He then ran in to get Mason, who called 911. Mr Parker was flown to hospital by helicopter in critical condition. He had 13 broken ribs but no internal organs were damaged – and two days later, he was well enough to go home. *ksl.com (Salt Lake City, UT)*, 3 Mar 2017.

For more on feats of superhuman strength in an emergency, see **FT45:25, 173:74, 181:13, 203:8**.

243: XMAS CARDS



ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

In the dear old days, Christmas cards were all about Baby Jesus and the Three Wise Men and the stable. It’s only in our secular, degenerate age that non-religious cards have appeared.

The “truth”

The opposite is true: secular Xmas cards predated religious ones. The first commercially produced card is generally agreed to be one commissioned by civil servant and postal reformer Sir Henry Cole, illustrated by John Callcott Horsley, in 1843. It shows a multi-generational gathering, toasting the recipient of the card through the “fourth wall,” while enjoying a boozy slap-up meal. Around the main picture are images of poor people receiving food and clothing. For the purpose of personalisation, there is a dotted line at the bottom next to the words “From,” and “Xmasse 1843.” These two themes – festivity and charity – dominated early Xmas cards, and indeed Christmas illustrations more generally, along with scenes of rural pursuits, nature and children. Wintry scenes were not, at first, popular, but humour was. Religious cards became established from the 1870s, but only as a minority of the market. Sending a religious card might have risked causing offence; many Protestants, especially Nonconformists, abhorred the use of scriptural imagery to celebrate what they saw as, essentially, a Pagan or even Papist festival.

Sources

Christmas in 19th-century England by Neil Armstrong (Manchester UP, 2010); www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-first-christmas-card

Disclaimer

One Christmas tradition we can all agree on is arguing about Christmas traditions. Don’t be left out of the festivities – write in to the letters page with your crackers corrections and carolling cavils.

Mythchaser

A baffled reader who describes herself as having “fully grasped” the fact that the world isn’t flat was perturbed to be told by her daughter that the Universe is flat. Does this mean anything? she demands.



ABOVE: In Bob Renning (inset, enjoying a well-earned cigar) bent open the doorframe of a burning SUV and pulled out trapped driver Michael Johannes.





STRANGE INVADERS

The devil's fingers reach out to the Mendips, while a supposed stowaway Turkish bee is sentenced to death

CHARLOTTE TARGETT / AVON WILDLIFE TRUST



ABOVE: This alien-like fungus was discovered on Hallowe'en by Avon Wildlife Trust. **BELOW:** The Toy family's stowaway bee – but was it really a Turkish invader?

DEVIL'S FINGERS

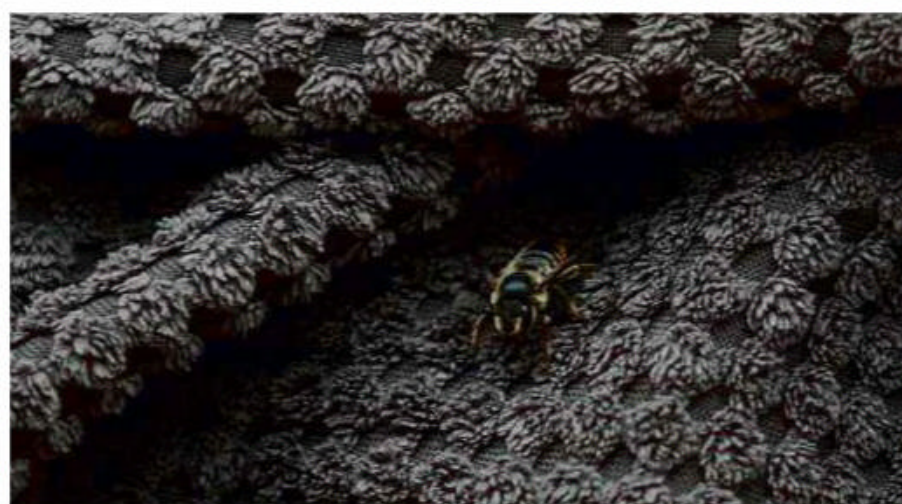
A rare fungus known as the devil's fingers was discovered on Hallowe'en at a nature reserve. An Avon Wildlife Trust conservation team chanced upon it at Dolebury Warren on the Mendip Hills near Bristol. "I didn't know what it was when I first saw it, it looked like some sort of strange sea creature," said Charlotte Targett of the Trust. The species, also known as octopus fungus, is thought to have arrived from Australia or New Zealand and was first discovered in Britain in 1914. "We were surprised to find devil's fingers fungi as it's a rare find in the UK, with only two known records from our region, both from 1999," said Ms Targett's colleague, Joe McSorley.

Dave Lamacraft from conservation charity Plantlife said the fungus "erupts from a partially buried 'egg' by pushing its red octopus-like arms through the egg which then

unfold revealing their sticky and smelly insides. Related to the stinkhorns, it smells of rotting flesh, which attract insects to the sticky substance on the octopus arms where the spores are found – the spores are then spread by the visiting insects." *BBC News*, 2 Nov 2019.

BEE DRAMA

"Turkish bee stowaway is sentenced to death by Defra" was the dramatic headline in the *Daily Telegraph* on 30 July. The rare *Osmia avosetta* variety of mason bee, only found in Turkey and Iran and first discovered 10 years ago, had reportedly hitched a lift from Dalaman in Turkey in a suitcase belonging to the Toy family, and had been living in and around their house in Bristol, constructing intricate cocoons out of flower petals in their conservatory. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) announced it intended to capture and



SWNS

destroy the insect because of the potential risk it posed to native species. Officials have become acutely sensitive to the presence of foreign bees since invasions of predatory Asian hornets began in 2004; they prey on honeybees and other crucial pollinators. Then on 30 July the Toys revealed that their bee had "escaped". However, Tim Lovett, a former President of the British Beekeepers Association, said it was highly unlikely one bee would cause a problem, particularly as the chances of it

cross-breeding were very small.

Then David Notton, chief bee curator at the Natural History Museum, said the petal nests in Bristol were too messy to have been made by the Turkish mason bee and – judging by size, shape and situation – were the work of a British patchwork leaf-cutter bee, *Megachile centuncularis*. "The nest of *Osmia avosetta* would be smaller and tidier in appearance," he said. So all the fuss was for nothing – probably. *D.Telegraph*, 30+31 July; *D.Mail*, 2 Aug 2019.

SEASON'S READINGS

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CONFERENCE REPORT

RENDLESHAM REVISITED

MATT SALUSBURY attended the 'Colonel Charles Halt Returns to Woodbridge' conference in Suffolk on 8 September 2019

The Rendlesham Forest UFO Incident (RFUI for short), which occurred over several nights in the last days of 1980, remains Britain's best-known UFO encounter (see **FT204:32-39** for an introduction). Nearly 40 years on, there's now a UFO Trail in the forest, complete with a grounded flying saucer sculpture and the former RAF Bentwaters air base, the epicentre of the RFUI, is now the Bentwaters Cold War Museum. A conference on Rendlesham – featuring star speaker Colonel Charles Halt, RAF Bentwaters deputy base commander in 1980 – is now an annual event in the Community Hall of the Suffolk town of Woodbridge, six miles from the scene of the incident.

This year's conference was opened by its organiser, local boy David Young, who runs the Paranormal Dimensions podcast (www.paukradio.com/). Next up was ex-police officer John Hanson, author of the *Haunted Skies* book series on historic British UFO encounters (www.hauntedskies.co.uk/) and more recently *The Halt Perspective*, co-authored with Halt. Hanson has seen "numerous UFOs", including two nocturnal encounters in Rendlesham Forest – a triangular craft and also a "milky white orb" hovering off the forest floor, shedding "pieces of fabric". He passed around "aports" – stones that he said materialised in the air in Rendlesham Forest and landed – too hot to handle – with "thuds".

Paranormal investigator Malcolm Robinson, of Strange Phenomenon Investigations, "started off as a bloody sceptic... how wrong was I?" (He still believes "the vast majority of UFO sightings can be explained," while most

Nessie sightings are "standing waves" caused by boats.) His scepticism changed after he was "slapped and kicked by... nothing" while investigating a haunted house where a "tremendous force pushed down on the back of his hand".

Facebook star Sascha Christie, author of *Capel Green – The Truth Behind The Rendlesham Forest Incident* knew Larry Warren, who was with the US Air Force Security Police based at Bentwaters at the time of RFUI and later co-authored with Peter Robbins probably the best-known Rendlesham book, *Left at East Gate*. Warren later stayed for a while on the Christie family's sofa, and Sascha helped him get Rendlesham-related talk radio gigs. But the title of Christie's talk was "The Larry Warren Fraud." There were alleged dodgy dealings in sports and pop star memorabilia.

There was inaudible footage of Warren at other conferences. There was forensic analysis of a photo put online in 2014, allegedly showing a UFO from "that night" in 1980. There were undoubtedly several different accounts given by Warren of what he was doing and where he was on that weekend over Christmas 1980. Warren later claimed that his original version wasn't his own, and that he was covering up to protect other servicemen – in particular Sgt Adrian Bustinza – from trouble if they told their stories about Rendlesham's "underground bases".

It's good to see the UFO community doing basic journalistic fact checking – more is needed in this field! Christie's efforts are to be commended (she took this year's Ultimate Bravery in Ufology Award); but she ran through her thesis at breakneck

speed, expecting the audience to be familiar with the confusing chronology around *Skycrash*, the original RFUI book, by Jenny Randles, Dot Cotton and Brenda Butler (the latter lives locally and was at this year's event), *Left at East Gate*, and Bustinza's account in *You Can't Tell the People* by Georgina Bruni. It was all somewhat baffling.

Astronomer David Bryant spoke on orbs. Bryant admits "many orbs are just photographic" while some orbs caught on film "are clearly moths," but he believes they're "not all dust and raindrops". He's seen orbs with his own eyes on Track 10 of Rendlesham Forest. He recounted how George Washington at his winter quarters at Valley Forge in 1777 was calmed by the sight of a "green orb" appearing before him. Bryant believes orbs – "frequently associated with strange mists" – are some sort of living "hungry energy beings" that feed off our "alert expectation", which pumps electromagnetic energy in response to them manifesting in front of us. Bryant concluded that: "We must strive to eliminate fraudulent, mischievous and dubious" data to arrive at "something which some day someone might take seriously."

John Hanson lamented the fact that "the media" still don't take UFOs seriously; but there were a lot of slides showing our speakers posing with *X-Files* supporting actors or even members of the Bay City Rollers.

Many talks didn't end so much as run out of time. Despite some prior knowledge of RFUI, and my journalists' training, I still couldn't follow such high-speed presentations. Attention to pace and timing is all it'd take for "the media" to take UFOs more seriously.

Several conference-goers told me they were only here to hear "Chuck" – Colonel Charles Irwin Halt. Woodbridge Community Hall was draped with stars and stripes bunting in Halt's honour. Unlike the self-taught ufologists preceding him, Chuck, with his US Air Force officer's training,



ABOVE: Matt Salusbury and Colonel Halt meet at Woodbridge Community Centre.



ABOVE: Colonel Charles Halt (left) in conversation with David Young.

knows how to give concise presentations. He can also deliver a vivid, compelling and credible narrative.

Joining the US Air Force while still in college, Halt ended up running the Pentagon's jet engine operation. There followed a stint as adviser to the Shah of Iran's Air Force – which he ended in time to avoid becoming a US Embassy hostage. He was heading for a command role with US forces in Norway when he was told RAF Bentwaters – then the largest base in the “free world” – needed a deputy base commander. This was in 1980, with a Soviet invasion of Poland feared, so “we exercised all the time – eight to 10 hours in a gas mask.”

Over Christmas 1980, Bentwaters was “down for the holidays,” with no flights scheduled. Following a routine Christmas Day dinner at Woody's Bar at nearby RAF Woodbridge, Halt toured the base on his usual daily morning rounds on 26 December. This included stopping at the police base to pick up the police logs around 6.30am; here he found a laughing sergeant describing how three security officers had been “out in the woods chasing UFOs all night” after they “thought they saw a downed aircraft.”

There were two strands to the base police, explained Halt.

“Law enforcement” wore blue uniforms and pistols – “they issued tickets.” Perimeter security wore camo fatigues and carried automatic weapons for “lethal force”. There were continual “behavioural problems” with security personnel – “it's boring.”

Jim Penniston, a security NCO, took a team off base in a truck along a muddy track to investigate, leaving their weapons at the hut by the gate, as regulations required. Penniston reported: “There's something out there,” and that radios didn't work. Halt told how Penniston had relayed back to security control that they “came across an object.” Penniston and another security policeman, Burroughs, recalled chasing an object – “multicoloured lights, something.”

Halt “didn't hear most of this stuff 'till years later.” The security police involved were “drugged and hypnotised by the time I got to them.” Following the debrief by the security police, Halt then attended the usual command post “morning stand up of senior colonels”. All were “sure there was a logical explanation”.

Over dinner the next night at Woody's, Second Lieutenant Bruce Ingham, commander of one of the two “flights” of security cops, came in white as a sheet, telling Halt, “I need

to talk to you and the base Commander right now.” In the privacy of the cloakroom, he said: “The UFO is back.”

Halt went out in a jeep with Sergeant Monroe Nevilles, who brought his Nikon camera. Halt took with him his “old micro-cassette recorder for taking notes” and asked Nevilles to collect the Geiger counter. There were “15-20 cops running around with light-alls” (torches) when they arrived at the scene. Halt went forward in a group of five to check out whatever it was they had seen. He was shown three indentations in the ground, where he was told “the craft landed the first night”. (Halt showed us his plaster cast of one of the indentations.) Neville's Geiger counter showed “nothing significant by way of background radiation.”

Then they “watched for several minutes” as a bright red, irregularly-shaped, glowing object in the nearby farmer's field bobbed up and down as it moved towards the forest, panicking the farmer's livestock, and “glowing, dripping and sending off sparks”. The object “suddenly silently explodes into five white balls and disappears”. Next came “multiple objects, moving in formation at 500ft [150m],” which Halt followed. After that, they saw two objects at “2,000 or 3,000ft [600m or 900m]”. One “comes over us and a beam comes out of it, you could see dust particles in... the beam – one of two of objects goes over the Bentwaters base, the beams fired into weapons store.” The Suffolk Police were called out too, but the local post office had been broken into and that took priority.

The next day “the Wing Commander (Major General Gordon E Williams) drives in.” When Williams heard Halt had made a tape, he asked for it, so he could take to it the next weekly Third Air Force meeting. When the wingco returned from his meeting, Halt asked: “Boss, do I still have a job?” Williams returned Halt's tape recorder, telling Halt: “Everybody

listened. What do we do? Nobody had an answer.”

Halt's boss decided: “It happened off the base – it's a British affair.” When the British liaison officer returned from his holidays, Halt wrote him a memo, the carbon copy of which “disappeared”. Then “nothing happened... I was relieved this was going to go away... this is not career enhancing.”

“Two years later, Mr Warren gets involved,” with a Freedom of Information Act request for Halt's memo. “We had to release it.” Halt then “had to go into hiding, no comment, no way, I don't want to get involved.”

Halt told how he quit RAF Bentwaters not because of “the incident” but because of the new commander, Sam Morgan, who he claimed bore him a grudge after Morgan's son, also in the USAF and stationed at Bentwaters, had earlier run-ins with the Security Police. Halt got a job in Germany, and worked for Dick Cheney's Department of Defense. Of the RFUI, Halt says it was fortunate it didn't harm his career, as it did harm those of the NCOs.

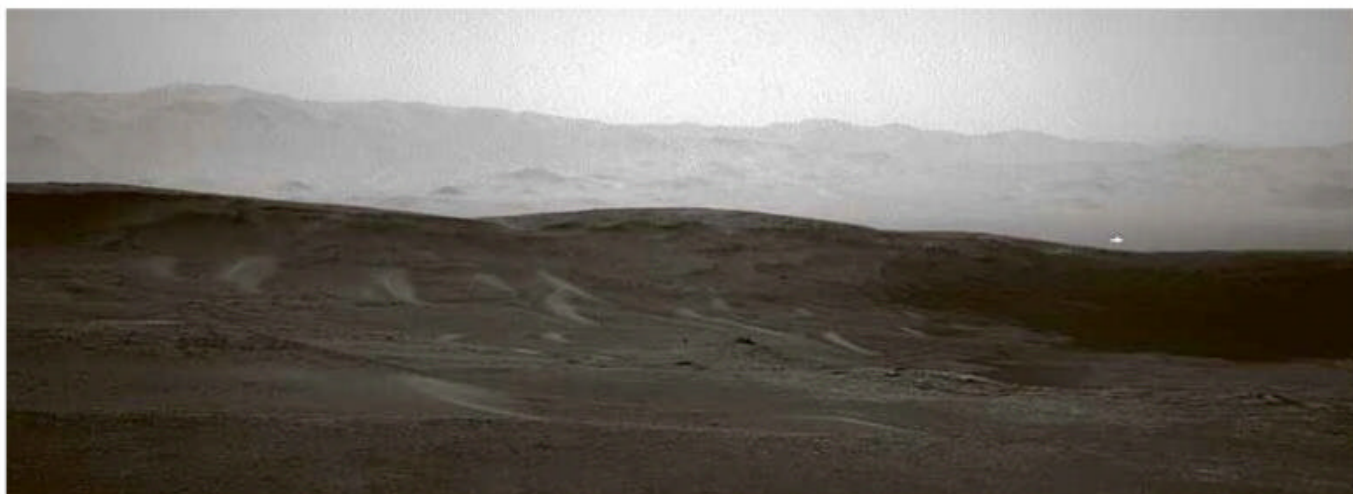
According to Halt, there were “spook fingerprints” all over Rendlesham “from day one”. Halt later found out that the CIA's Dr Chris Green, believed to be “liaison” to the White House on UFOs – flew into the base days after the incident without his knowledge. Years later, Halt received a letter from a man who was in the Bentwaters air traffic control tower during the Rendlesham incident and who claimed to have seen “three clearly triangular craft with lights”. His source added that: “Everyone on air traffic control who reports a UFO has been decertified and becomes a cook or mechanic.”

David Young's video of Colonel Halt's 2019 talk is at <https://youtu.be/aQW-jdEed8U?fbclid=IwAR3pKTyN7ccPzGzpntjFuOiaxDrR1klurWom9-c3ZH7cJYmC5Y3BneTlipY>. A possible 40th anniversary Rendlesham “special memorial event” is planned for Woodbridge in 2020. Details will be at <http://www.paukradio.com/>



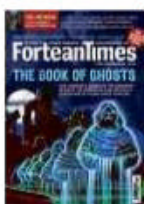
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NASA



ABOVE: One of the recent photos from NASA's Curiosity explorer showed an unexplained bright flash on the surface of Mars.

ASTRAL BULLETIN [FT385:8-9]



'Oumuamua is not the first interstellar meteor to have visited Earth, scientists recently discovered.

Examining the Center for Near-Earth Object Studies' catalogue of meteor events, they found a record of a yard (90cm)-wide meteor detected in January 2014 over the South Pacific near Papua New Guinea. Its speed and trajectory were consistent with an origin beyond our Solar System. High speeds are indicative of interstellar visitors, since the Sun's gravitational pull tends to slow down local meteors. Astronomers now believe that many more such distant travellers may have visited (or will visit) our Solar System than previously thought; potential excitement lies in the possibility that such interstellar meteors may transport lifeforms (bacteria, tardigrades) between stars. Earlier this year, an amateur astronomer discovered a comet, C/2019 Q4 (Borisov), whose hyperbolic, eccentric orbit suggests it began its journey in another star system. Unlike the small, faint 'Oumuamua, C/2019 Q4 (Borisov) appears very large, around 12.5 miles (20km) wide.

The Earth experienced a lucky escape in July 2019 when an asteroid with a diameter

estimated between 187ft and 427ft (57-130m) narrowly avoided a collision with our planet. The asteroid, named 2019OK, was travelling at a speed of 15 miles (24km) per second and whizzed past the Earth about 43,500 miles (70,000km) away. This may not sound close, but it's the nearest recorded approach by a space object since astronomers began tracking their movements. Had 2019OK impacted on land, the potential damage is difficult to estimate, but could potentially have been devastating. The 1908 Tunguska event in Siberia destroyed 770 sq miles (2,000 sq km²) of forest, knocking down 80 million trees and causing at least three human deaths. It is believed to have been the result, not of actual impact with the Earth's surface, but of disintegration at an altitude of 3-6 miles (5-10km). That the Tunguska event occurred in a remote and sparsely populated region of Siberia was fortunate indeed; the same disintegration over a town or city could have been catastrophic. Fortunately, it is estimated that asteroids of this size enter the Earth's atmosphere only once every 300 years or so.

In the previous month, an image captured by NASA's Mars explorer, Curiosity, showed an unexplained bright flash, seemingly from nowhere and with no apparent origin.

Naturally, the image caused much excitement on the Web (was it evidence of a passing alien craft? Alien technology on Mars?), but such flashes have been seen before, and scientists believe they are caused by reflections from distant rocks or by the Sun's glare.

In September 2019 Chinese media sources were claiming that the country's lunar rover, Yutu-2 ('Jade Rabbit'), had stumbled upon a mysterious "gel-like" substance sitting in a crater on the far side of the Moon. Details are sparse at the moment, but there is speculation that the substance is not actually a gel at all, but is in fact glass formed from molten rock following a high-energy meteorite impact on the Moon's surface, long ago. Nevertheless, Yutu-2's findings are worth keeping an eye on, as its mission is the first ever to explore the Moon's far side. *space.com*, 16 April; *CNN*, 19 April; *bgr.com*, 24 June; *vox.com*, 26 July; *BBC News*, 12 Sept; *technologyreview.com*, 14 Sept 2019.

NOT SO OLD? [FT376:15]



French officials have refused to change the death certificate of the oldest person on record despite claims of fraud by Russian researchers. Jeanne Calment died in 1997 aged 122 and 164

days, but a recent Russian study claimed she had in fact died in 1934, her daughter then assuming her identity in order to avoid paying inheritance tax. However, a report in the *Journal of Gerontology* said the claims were a "conspiracy theory" based on "inaccurate facts". The French researchers included Michel Allard, a doctor with the Ipsen Foundation, and Jean-Marie Robine, an expert on supercentenarians, who interviewed Calment 30 times in the 1990s. Robine analysed the original data used to validate her identity along with fresh documentation to show "there was neither tax fraud nor falsification of Jeanne Calment's identity". When Allard listened again to the interviews he and Robine taped with Calment, he hears her say that her daughter Yvonne had lived in a sanatorium, possibly for tuberculosis, though the disease was considered too shameful to be named in those days. Jeanne said Yvonne came home to die in Arles in 1934.

The other authors of the report were Swiss gerontologist Bernard Jeune and Danish scientist François Herrmann. Out of more than 10 million centenarians, the probability of somebody reaching Calment's age, was "certainly small, but that is far from making Ms Calment a statistical impossibility", the report said. The central motive of the deception theory – the inheritance tax fraud – was shown to be absent: there was no advantage to be gained, it turned out. Jeanne Calment was genetically prone to longevity, since her two parents and four grandparents reached a combined age of 477 years, compared to an average of 289 years for most people. In a town of 25,000 people, where the Calments were well known, it would have been impossible for the daughter, who was 23



years younger than her mother, to assume her mother's identity without anyone noticing, they said. *theregister.co.uk*, 16 Sept; *Irish Times*, 17 Sept; *BBC News*, 18 Sept 2019.

ANOTHER ABC [FT386:22]



Kayleigh Holmes, 31, was walking her Labrador-Rottweiler cross Loki on 13 October with husband Adam

and one of their three children in Wakerley Woods near Corby, Northamptonshire, when the dog disappeared into the trees. Soon afterwards their pet came back growling and with a claw wound between his eyes and cuts on his legs. Mr Holmes, 39, went to investigate and was confronted by a massive "black panther". He threw a log at the ABC, which had its teeth bared, and it ran off. Mrs Holmes said it was about 60ft (18m) away from Loki at the bottom of a hill, adding: "It was about two or three times bigger than my dog and black. It was scruffy looking and had yellow eyes. Loki comes up to my knees and weighs 90lb [41kg], so he is not a small dog. It was a massive thing and I don't know what else it could have been." Northamptonshire Police said they had received other reports about ABC sightings in that area. Loki was prescribed anti-inflammatory medicine by the vet.

A friend stated on Facebook that she had been a passenger in a car when another "black panther" ran across the road in front of it days earlier at Greetham, 17 miles (27km) away in Rutland. On 31 March 2019 Craig Smith from Kettering was convinced he also saw a panther in Wakerley Wood. In 2012 a couple spotted a big cat in the same woodlands, and other sightings have been reported near Gretton. There was also a sighting of an ABC in 2008 in Wellingborough. And in 2004 there were six sightings across the area in just two weeks. Chris Lawton, from Rutland Wildlife Sanctuary, said: "A lot of people have had stock going missing such as sheep and lambs." *dailymail.co.uk*, 24 Oct 2019.



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

FAIRY VENGEANCE?

I do not normally take warnings about fairy vengeance seriously. The chances of one of my children being changed in the crib or of my meagre livestock (a dog, some tortoises) being annihilated has always seemed slim. However, I may now have to revise my opinions.

A week ago I was taking a late walk in my local fairy wood and the dark came in more quickly than I had expected. This has happened in the past and I've always found my way along the well-known tracks. But here I committed a dreadful *faux pas*. I've recently bought a cell phone and I turned it on and used its weak light as an improvised torch. I did this despite having heard it said (seriously and jocularly) that the spirits of the woods do not like Wi-Fi – and this, I should add, was in a particularly sinister corner of the forest.

I came to the top of a wall, shone my telephone over and saw that the road was just a 30 or 40cm (12 or 16in) jump away. I stepped down. This proved a mistake. The light from the telephone had lied or fairy glamour had done its work and I fell some two metres, breaking, on impact, several bones on my right side. The next minutes were unpleasant.

Today, a week after my fall, I returned to the wood with my wife. I wanted to find the

site of the accident in the daylight. But as we were entering that particular area of the wood we were forced to halt. Two trees had fallen across the way, decisively blocking the path. I returned home chastened: in fact, I felt like I'd been slapped.

I have a decade-long history with this wood. I go there every day, making up

for hours in front of the computer. I've been there in rainstorms, snow and desiccating heat. I clear it of rubbish and dead wood. I have no idea if 'fairies' dwell in its bowers: I have long been and remain a small 's' sceptic. But I find it fascinating how the narrative part of my brain reads both these incidents in that light. Some of the wilder green theorists (e.g. Bill Devall) talk about our capacity to form a relationship with landscapes – one used less and less in the digital age.

I certainly have a relationship with the wood: we are presently barely on speaking terms.

I wonder if this capacity to form relationships with the inanimate should not join the list of things that allow us to experience the supernatural. There is a very human attempt to anthropomorphise (and so communicate with) the inscrutable world around us, one which enables magical thinking.

Simon Young's new book *Magical Folk: British and Irish Fairies* is out now.

I CERTAINLY
HAVE A
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WITH THE WOOD:
WE ARE BARELY
ON SPEAKING
TERMS



Is anybody out there?

PETER BROOKESMITH surveys the latest fads and flaps from the world of ufological research



ABOVE: Edward Snowden peers out from the cover of his recently published memoir, *Permanent Record*.

“ALIENS HAVE NEVER CONTACTED EARTH”

“...or at least, they haven’t contacted US intelligence.”

I didn’t say that. Edward Snowden, ex-NSA whistleblower extraordinaire, did in his memoir *Permanent Record*, which came out in September. Toward the end of October, commentator Joe Rogan published an interview with Snowden on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=efs3QRr8LWw), in which he repeated the claims in his book that “climate change is real”, but there’s no evidence of chemtrails being real. And he also said: “I know, Joe, I know you want there to be aliens... And there probably are, right? But the idea that we’re hiding them – if we are hiding them – I had ridiculous access to the networks of the NSA, the CIA, the military, all these groups. I couldn’t find anything. So if it’s hidden, and it could be hidden, it’s hidden really damn well, even from people who are on the inside.”

Well, it would be, wouldn’t it? Snowden’s job at the NSA and later as a contractor was to protect their computers from cyberspies. He seems to have been a kind of anti-hacker, which means you have to be a hacker of a pretty high order first. But no matter how many firewalls you can burrow through, if you come across something that requires you to prove you have a need-to-know and you are who you say you are, you’d be stuffed if you didn’t know who was privy to whatever you couldn’t get at. The chances are too that said privy persons would need to be at a specific workstation to get the latest on strawberry ice cream preferences, or whatever.

At Snowden’s announcement, anyone may have briefly entertained an image of nasty,

noisy negativists tapping their bulbous noses with their gnarled fingers and murmuring, “Told you so” in contented complacency. But that would be wrong too, because the true sceptic will always ask the extra question, and be content (but not complacent) with the answer, “I don’t know”. And will keep on asking questions and trying to think laterally. Edward Snowden is no doubt telling the truth about what he didn’t find concerning alien contact. That doesn’t mean there isn’t something to find, but equally it may mean that indeed there isn’t anything there to find. After all, if you were an alien, who’d you rather contact and have on your tail – the combined forces of US intelligence, or the flopsy popsicle that’s Tom DeLonge?

Speaking of whom, although we strive not to, a commenter on Robert Sheaffer’s blog has observed sagely: “If Tom DeLonge stares at a goat long enough, it’ll eventually drop dead...” Yep. Might even die of laughing.

TOO MUCH INFORMATION

I quote from a review by Tom Chivers in the *Spectator* of 9 November: “Apparently the first audio message broadcast into space with the ostensible purpose of communicating with aliens was the sound of vaginal contractions in ballerinas. According to Daniel Oberhaus’s book *Extraterrestrial Languages*, the artist Joe Davis beamed the information from an MIT radar installation towards the stars Tau Ceti and Epsilon Eridani in 1985. A USAF colonel shut the transmission down when he discovered what the content was. Never mind the difficulties of communicating with aliens; sometimes it’s pretty hard to understand what’s going on in the minds of humans.”

Quite so. Whoever knew ballerinas made such noises? I shall never watch *Swan Lake* in quite the same way again. Never mind about beaming such sounds into space: whoever thought of making such a recording, and – perhaps one shouldn’t ask, for fear of the answer – why? And maybe worse, *how*? (If only there had been Ig Nobel prizes back then!) Always assuming any aliens out there actually want to communicate with us, one wonders what intimate noises may have come our way, and we didn’t recognise them, such as – keeping it clean – the sound of their ears rubbing together, say, or the munching of an unripe space cucumber. Too little attention, it seems to me, is paid to the notion that ET may have as weird a sense of humour as ourselves, just rather different.

UFOLOGY DIES AGAIN

There was a kerfuffle I don’t know how many years ago in the popular prints along the lines of ‘ufology is dead’. It even became the theme for a panel discussion at an FT UnCon. It was all inspired by the news that the Bristol-based British Flying Saucer Bureau, this sceptic’s isle’s oldest UFO organisation (founded 1953), had closed down, which as I recall turned out to be not quite true. On 19 October this year, in an article for the *Times*, Ben MacIntyre resurrected this wheeze in an article titled “Mysterious case of the vanishing UFOs”. It was a half-baked piece, fairly typical of the posh papers’ approach to the subject in recent years. MacIntyre rambles around the subject, blaming what he considers the dearth of sightings and encounters on the Internet (the poor old net gets stick for everything and anything someone or anyone doesn’t like), the end of the Cold War, and the failure of abductees in the age of smartphones to take selfies. Mostly, though, he seems to think that UFOs and aliens have slipped off the mainstream radar because ‘we’ aren’t afraid of them any more: “Today the threats we fear no longer come from outer space but nearer to home in the form of terrorism, crime and political upheaval... The UFOs have disappeared because we stopped fearing them, then we stopped believing in them, and finally we stopped noticing them.” One has to presume ‘we’ – ‘top people’ who read the *Times*, one supposes – never notice the kind of stuff that regularly clutters the pages of the *Sun*, the *Express* and the *Star*, let alone the crap on cable TV and, of course, the infinite vista of credulous rubbish that infests and festoons the dreaded Internet.

Ufology is dead! Long live ufology!



Scramble, UFO! Part Two: Origins

JENNY RANGLES continues her investigation of the MoD's involvement in 1950s UFO sightings

Regular FT writer Dr David Clarke was the person the Ministry of Defence chose to help release thousands of UFO files into the public domain via Freedom of Information laws. For the last two decades he has summarised releases through the National Archives. As we saw last month, official investigation of UFO cases seems to have been taking place in the early 1950s, following the decision by PM Winston Churchill to take sightings by RAF crew seriously. Dr Clarke found one such case in the files from RAF Farnborough, where scattered bits of evidence allow us to infer that a 1950s study may have occurred.

What that unit was doing was not revealed to witnesses themselves and no records survive about it in released files, the official reason being that most 1950s data were routinely destroyed before the decision to retain UFO reports was taken by parliament. There had been a 'Flying Saucer Working Party' looking into such data but it closed down in 1951. Its findings were 'lost' for many years, but a copy found 50 years later led Dr Clarke to discover links between the UK and US; the FSWP used the term 'UFO' in June 1951 when that was still very rare beyond Washington. Interestingly the 1951 closure report shows that US intelligence advice had been to keep this science secret from the public, which the Air Ministry successfully did for many decades. That Churchill ordered a full review of UFO investigation just a year later implies that any closure of this early project was limited.

On Churchill's orders, defence chiefs sent RAF intelligence staff to talk in person with Project Blue Book in Washington and draw up plans. Whatever UFO project resulted, and wherever it was located, it was modelled on Blue Book. This suggests an RAF facility would have been involved (Blue Book was at Wright Patterson AFB in Ohio) and would have had consultants like Dr J Allen Hynek evaluating the most interesting cases.

Indeed two of the three main cases that the Joint Technical Intelligence Committee report of 1951 assessed were from multi-witness events at Farnborough in August and September 1950. They involved a similar object seen by various RAF staff. Both incidents shared one witness – a test pilot who, like Flt Lt Wright (see **FT386:26-27**), was taken very seriously. This man was Flt Lt Stan Hubbard, who later became a Wing Commander and test flew the 'flying bedstead', an early prototype that paved the

way for the Harrier jump jet and the Apollo Moon Lander. In 2002, when he found this Ministry report, David Clarke interviewed the now elderly Hubbard and showed him the secret evaluation that had been lost for 50 years. Just one copy was sent to Sir Henry Tizard (who had been key to the development of radar around Rendlesham Forest prior to WWII and took UFO data seriously). Up to his death in 1959, Tizard was chief consultant to the MoD science intelligence review. He seems to have been the British equivalent of Allen Hynek, and the DSTI (the science technology intelligence unit) continued to receive copies of UFO reports throughout the next 40-50 years of MoD investigation. The cover letter to Tizard suggests it was to "serve a purpose".

Just as with Flt Lt Wright, Hubbard's report went to science intelligence officers looking at the data. Yet, unlike Wright, the pilot was interviewed by two men at Farnborough within minutes of his breakfast-time sighting being reported. The men got a full account of a fizzing disc with sparkling lights round the edge and a crackling energy surrounding it that left an ozone-like smell in the air. This object had passed slowly overhead as Hubbard walked across the base. This remarkably fast debrief at a time when speedy travel was not as easy as it is today suggests these officers did not have far to go: Farnborough could well have been the home of the intelligence staff doing this investigation. Yet the RAF man had no idea until shown the rediscovered file that the report suggested that he had seen an optical illusion. He recalled that the two men who interrogated him were thorough but asked odd questions, some of which seemed 'esoteric' and appeared to have no relevance to the object that Hubbard saw.

This is fascinating because the two men, also professing to be from the Ministry, who visited Jim Templeton in connection with the 'spaceman' photo he took on Burgh Marshes in Cumbria in 1964 acted in a similar way (see **FT196:29, 286:28-29, 305:28**). Their questions were not confined to the events but focused on the weather and behaviour of local animals. As a result, many researchers think the two men who visited the Templetons were 'rogue' UFO investigators or UFO buffs 'pretending'. Perhaps they were, but I suspect otherwise. I have interviewed other witnesses who received such visits from 'intelligence officers'. This suggests to me that beyond the Whitehall MoD office that collated public UFO sightings, someone,

somewhere, was selecting cases involving 'believable' witnesses then going to see them. Police officers on duty and RAF test pilots certainly fit that brief.

The pattern in these reports is also telling. They often involve cases that suggest some kind of atmospheric energy was witnessed. What Hubbard described sounds like an extreme version of ball lighting and the ozone smell matches another case from near Rendlesham Forest; something similar was also seen close to Sizewell nuclear power plant; Hubbard was at a key RAF test site; and the Templeton photo was taken close to where Blue Streak missiles were assembled. This seems like an awful lot of coincidences involving highly sensitive locations. Perhaps someone with scientific knowledge was aware of that pattern or saw hints of a rare atmospheric energy phenomenon later named 'UAP' (Unidentified Atmospheric Phenomenon) by the MoD. However they were formed, these phenomena needed to be studied and perhaps developed into an offensive or defensive weapon. The focus on cases in locations of strategic importance makes sense too: these would be prioritised for MoD study.

Did Tizard see this very early? Was the 'purpose' to explain these cases away but allow a smokescreen of alien invasion to take root in the public imagination to deter others from asking questions? Would this give MoD scientists a subtle way of discrediting the validity of something to which they wanted to restrict access during covert investigations? Dismissing Hubbard's report as an optical illusion is odd, given the evidence, as it better fits an atmospheric phenomenon – and Tizard was very aware of these given his links with early radar.

If your job is to assess a possible UAP – which could potentially be harnessed as a weapon – then the more that data is kept 'in-house', the better – especially if rival nations chasing the same evidence are led to believe UFOs must be 'optical illusions' or 'aliens', neither requiring too much interest, leaving the MoD a free hand. The real UFO cover-up may have been very different in nature from the popular myths about little green men crashing their spaceships with alarming regularity and always in some out of the way spot in a friendly country... But the Farnborough connection has more to offer. Next month we will conclude with a final case that joins the dots and allows us to ask some searching questions.

A GHOST STORY FOR CHRISTMAS

EDWARD PARNELL recalls a tradition of seasonal scares as he travels back to the 1970s and a golden age of television ghost stories produced by the BBC from the works of MR James and Charles Dickens – a tradition being revived once again this Christmas...

Many of the ghost stories of the master of the form, Montague Rhodes James [see FT292:30–37], found their first public audience on Christmas Eve. By the light of a single candle, James read them out, in what became a yearly spectacle, to his assembled fellow Cambridge academics. In carrying on a loose tradition that Charles Dickens had earlier popularised, the 1862-born Cambridge don had become the unwitting new keeper of the seasonal supernatural flame.¹ And though the festive telling of ghostly winter tales clearly took place before Dickens – cold dark nights lend themselves to it – the Victorian writer brought the practice into the mainstream through *A Christmas Carol* and the stories he published in his own weekly magazine, *Household Words*.

The work of MR James already had a pedigree on British television when the BBC began a new annual Christmas viewing tradition in 1971. In May 1968, Jonathan Miller had adapted James's 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad' for the BBC arts series *Omnibus*, curtailing its title to *Whistle and I'll Come To You*. The stripping out of the flourish of the original story's Robert Burns-inspired name is mirrored in the film's pared-down, black-and-white scenes, filmed on the cliffs at Dunwich in Suffolk and in the marram-guarded dunes of Waxham on the north-east corner of the Norfolk coastline. Where James's story playfully examines the nature of our belief in the irrational (though allowing the possibility of the existence of things beyond everyday



LEFT: The first BBC adaptation of a James story, *Whistle and I'll Come to You*, from 1968.

comprehension), Miller's take is very much a psychoanalytical one that transforms Parkin – renamed from Parkins in James's original – into an ageing don on the threshold of a nervous breakdown.

A WARNING TO THE CURIOUS

Five past eleven on Christmas Eve 1971, on BBC One, saw Lawrence Gordon Clark venturing into the festive darkness for the first time, as he both adapted and directed a 45-minute version of James's story 'The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral' (the word 'Cathedral' was dropped from the production's title). The tale of murderous revenge had become the first film in the broadcaster's 'A Ghost Story for Christmas' strand, which was to run annually until 1978, even though it was initially pitched as a one-off.

When Clark brought the idea of *The Stalls of Barchester* to Paul Fox, the Controller of BBC One, the 32-year-old documentary maker was already fascinated

by, and familiar with, James's work. Shot largely around Norwich's Norman cathedral and its impressive mediæval close, the film also memorably featured the atmospheric vocal accompaniments of the cathedral's choir; scouting and finding the right location was to become a large factor in the ensuing, and enduring, success of Clark's pieces. *The Stalls of Barchester* had a budget of £9,000 (an amount that was ultimately exceeded), with a generous 18 days assigned to filming.

James's stories found their first public audience on Christmas Eve



EDWARD PARNELL

ABOVE: Wells Woods, the “beautiful and menacing” location for *A Warning to the Curious*. **BELOW:** (left to right) *The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral*, shown on Christmas Eve 1971, was the first of Lawrence Gordon Clark’s James adaptations, followed by *A Warning to the Curious* in 1972 and *Lost Hearts* in 1973.



The adaptation starred Robert Hardy, himself a big fan of James’s stories, as the haunted Archdeacon Haynes, and Clive Swift in the investigative role of Dr Black. “I was a documentary producer/director who had never directed a drama, let alone adapted and produced it as well,” Clark later commented. You certainly can’t tell.

Swift went on to reprise the same role in the following year’s production. *A Warning to the Curious* was also broadcast during the final hour of Christmas Eve. It too was written and directed by Clark. The setting shifts James’s coastal town of Seaburgh from Suffolk to Norfolk, the harbour and pine woods of Wells-next-the-Sea and Holkham providing the main locations. Later, we see a



church and lighthouse; these distinctive landmarks were filmed further east along the coast around the collapsing cliffs of Happisburgh, where in 2013, archaeologists uncovered a set of 800,000-year-old hominid footprints – the most ancient marks of humanity found outside Africa [FT313:19].

Wells Woods manages to look both beautiful and menacing in *A Warning to the Curious* – it was shot (during February and March) on grainy colour 16mm film beneath a wintry sun that causes the near-sculptural trees to cast long, sinister shadows. As for its night-time scenes, they rival *The Blair Witch Project* for the creepiness of their glimpsed torchlit horrors among the shadowed trunks. Although Wells and Holkham’s seemingly



unending expanse of sandy beach (which features in the opening sequence and again, briefly, to devastating effect at its climax) is now a busy, year-round tourist destination, the belt of dune-strengthening, Victorian-planted Corsican pines can be disconcerting once you get away from the crowds; I certainly remember feeling unsettled as I wandered around on my own birdwatching trips here as a teenager. Pine needles smother the thin grey soil, the knotted trunks and thick canopy block out the daylight and, though the narrowness of the strip of trees means you shouldn’t become disoriented, it’s still easy to lose your bearings and find you’ve walked much further than you intended.

COURTESY BFI & BBC



ABOVE: The grey-skinned ghost children of *Lost Hearts*. OPPOSITE: 1974's offering was *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas*. BELOW: *The Ash Tree*, from 1975.

At its heart, *A Warning to the Curious* features a wonderful central performance from the late Peter Vaughan, who at this point in his career was best known for his role in Sam Peckinpah's violent *Straw Dogs* – though he later would gain greater recognition for playing the elderly butler, Stevens senior, in the film version of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, and as the comically menacing criminal godfather Grouty from the sitcom *Porridge*. Vaughan makes Paxton a sympathetic figure, aided by changes in the script from the original that transform him into a lower-middle-class clerk who's recently been made redundant, rendering his search for the fabled lost crown of East Anglia more forgivable.

Another major change to the story is the film's opening. During World War I, 12 years before the action of the present, we witness a previous archaeologist's attempt to dig up and steal the artefact; as a result he is hacked to death with a billhook by William Ager, the guardian of the legendary object, who at this point is still flesh and blood. I think this scene perhaps reveals a little too much too soon (Clark wanted to demonstrate that the threat facing Vaughan's character was a physical one), though Ager undoubtedly presents a scary figure. But the altered opening does give us a memorable line absent from the original, as the consumptive Ager rasps from the top of the pine-clad hillock at his imminent first victim, his cloak fluttering ominously in the breeze: "No diggin' ere!"

An archæologist is hacked to death with a billhook by William Ager



LOST HEARTS

1973's ghostly BBC offering was broadcast on the evening of Christmas Day itself. *Lost Hearts* was probably the second story that James wrote, finishing it at some point between summer 1892 and autumn of the following year. Clark again directed the 35-minute film, though this time the screenplay was adapted by Robin Chapman,

with the producer being Rosemary Hill (a role she retained for the rest of the strand); the previous year's *A Warning to the Curious* had attained remarkable viewing figures of nine million people – Christmas was the most-watched week of the schedule – leading the powers-that-be at the Corporation to decide that they needed to have more input into the production.

Lost Hearts happened to be the first 'Ghost Story for Christmas' that I came across, catching a Christmas Eve 1994 repeat after returning late from the pub to the Lincolnshire house in which I grew up. The TV production of *Lost Hearts* ranged widely over my home county (also the setting for James's story); certainly, I would have recognised the landscape of the ominous opening scene, as Stephen's carriage emerges from the morning haze of a long Fenland drive, passing vast fields where the ghost children wait. This premature appearance of the two grey-skinned horrors – albeit creepy – is for me one of the film's few weaknesses, for it begs too many questions about their motivation, and their foreshadowed knowledge of future events; in this way, at least, I think James's original, where the spirits are portrayed as forces of vengeful hunger, works better. But the screen version's ghosts – the gypsy girl Phoebe and the Italian boy Giovanni – make petrifying apparitions with their greyish-blue skin, yellowed teeth, weirdly hypnotic swaying, and those extraordinary claw-like fingers. The maniacal movement

of Mr Abney too – he’s usually filmed with the camera tracking him, or circling Stephen in the way a big cat circles its prey – is remarkable, Clark later commenting that Joseph O’Conor’s wonderfully predatory performance was inspired by Robert Wiener’s fêted work of German Expressionism, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*.

1974’s *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas* kept the same producer and director team, with John Bowen, who had previously written the classic 1970 folk horror ‘Play for Today’, *Robin Redbreast*, responsible for the script. The action switched from the Germany of James’s original to Wells Cathedral in Somerset, whose gothic gargoyles serve the film well. “I had a little difficulty persuading the dean and chapter to allow us to film there because they’d given permission to Pier Paolo Pasolini to shoot his *Canterbury Tales* there a year or two before and he’d filmed an orgy in the cloisters,” Clark said in a later interview. Like ‘A Warning to the Curious’, this is a story about a lost treasure, with a puzzle to be solved and a guardian to be avoided at all costs. This final element is the most underwhelming aspect of the film, something that Clark himself regretted. “I can only offer in excuse that we were on a terribly tight budget and schedule in 1974 and the monster that James hints at so skilfully was beyond our means.”

1975 saw an adaptation by Clark of James’s Suffolk-set tale of witchery, *The Ash Tree*. This was to be the last of the 1970s James adaptations in the Christmas strand, and in my opinion is the least successful. Interestingly the ash tree in the film was in the grounds of Clark’s own Cornish home, Bokelly, with additional shooting taking place in the grander Prideaux Place near Padstow.

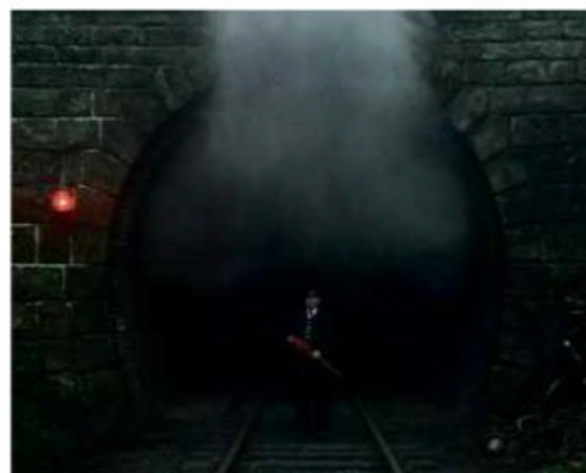
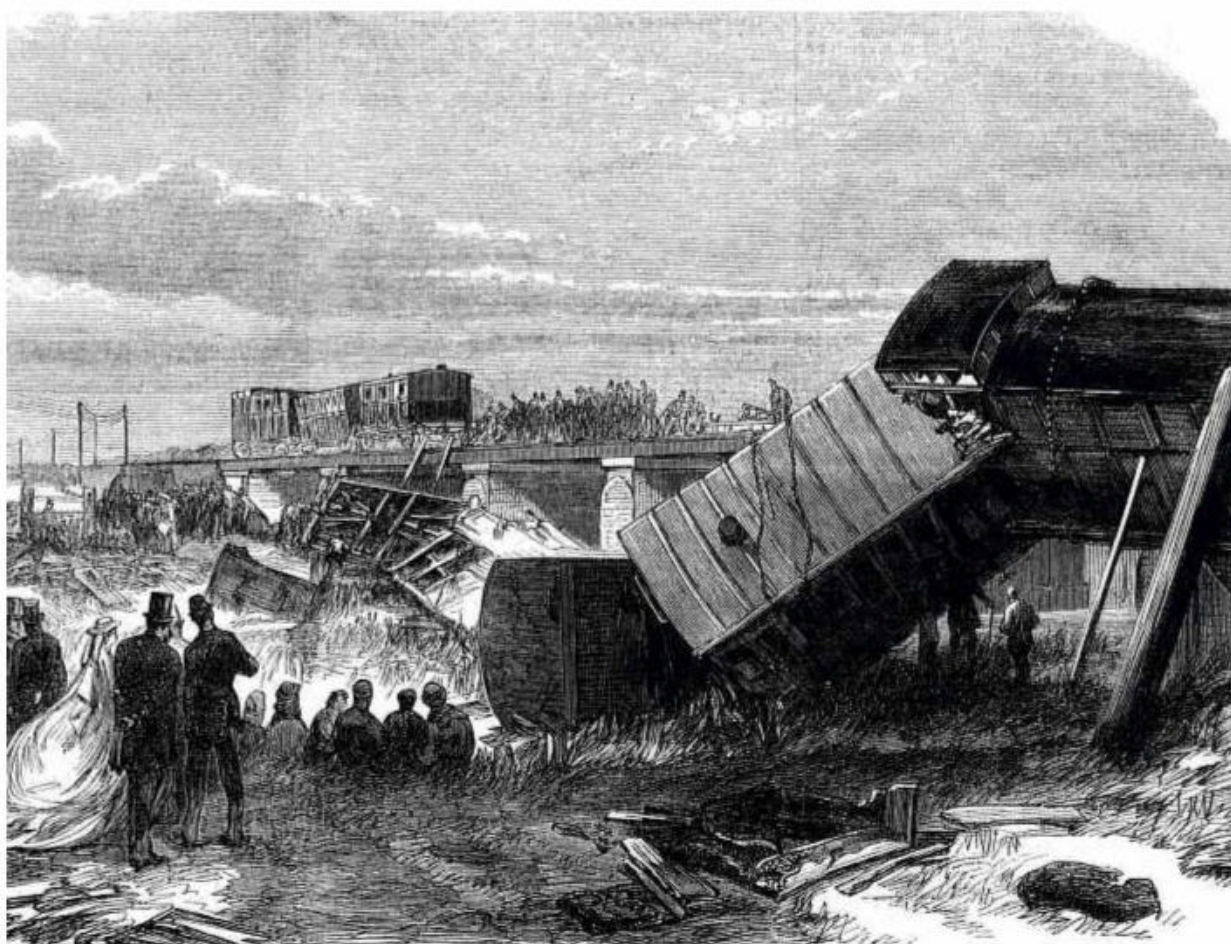


COURTESY BFI & BBC

Clark’s sixth ghost story, a 50-minute masterpiece transmitted on 22 December 1976, broke away from James to that earlier teller of Christmas tales, Charles Dickens. *The Signalman* features a superb performance from Denholm Elliott, whose terrifying vision of his future may well be the most frightening sequence in the entire strand. The original story features three supernaturally foretold railway accidents; it was written the year after Dickens was himself an unwilling participant in just such an event, when the train he was travelling on derailed at Staplehurst in Kent, killing 10 people and injuring 50.

AFTER THE GOLDEN AGE

Following such a successful piece of drama would be difficult, and the decision was made within the BBC hierarchy that more modern ghost stories should be attempted in future. Consequently, a planned adaptation by Clark of James’s ‘Count Magnus’ unfortunately never came to fruition. The penultimate offering in the original run of the ‘Ghost Story for Christmas’ strand, 1977’s contemporary-set *Stigma*, was filmed around the ancient monument of Avebury (also the setting for the frighteningly weird HTV children’s drama of the same year, *Children of the*



COURTESY BFI & BBC

ABOVE LEFT: A contemporary illustration of the Staplehurst train crash. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Charles Dickens was a passenger, and the celebrated railway ghost story he subsequently wrote was adapted for the 1976 Christmas ghost story slot as *The Signalman*, starring Denholm Elliott.

MARTIN'S CLOSE

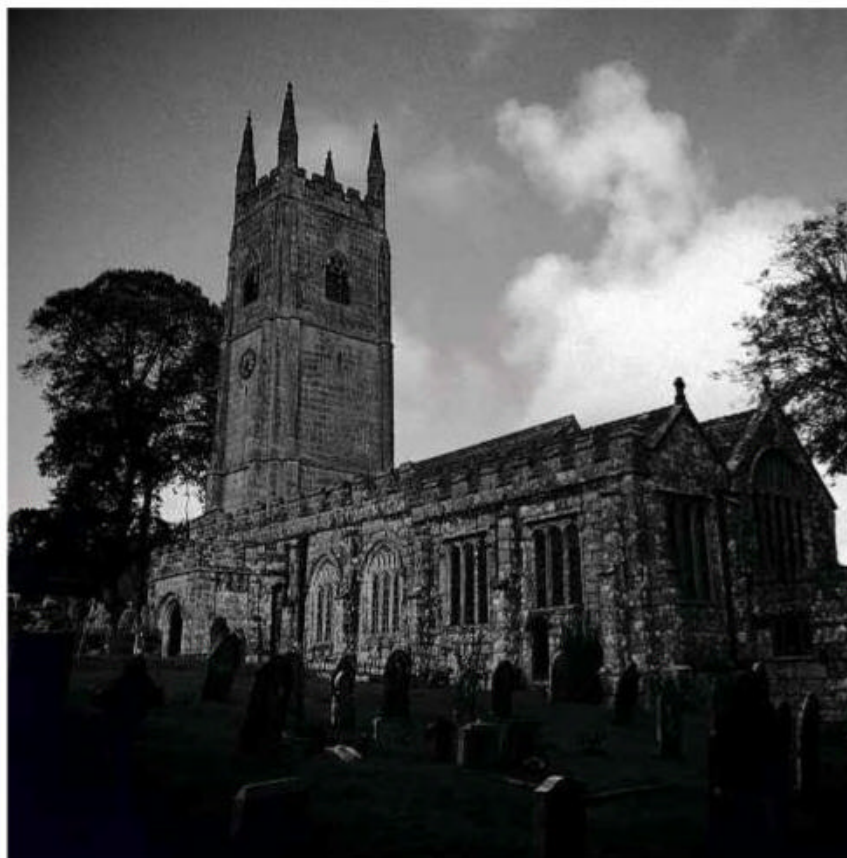
EDWARD PARNELL travels to the mid-Devon village that provided the real-life inspiration for MR James's tale

This year sees a new BBC Christmas adaptation of one of MR James's ghost stories, a 30-minute retelling of 'Martin's Close', written and directed by Mark Gatiss, filmed in Epping Forest, and starring Peter Capaldi.

A few miles outside Dartmoor's northern fringe I come to the pretty village of Sampford Courtenay. MR James came here too, in 1893, as a 30-year-old on official business for King's College, Cambridge. It's clear that the place left a mark on him, as he saw fit to identify it as the setting of his story 'Martin's Close', without feeling the need to disguise its name.

'Martin's Close' is cleverly constructed, with denser deployment even than usual of MRJ's favoured device of using purported archaic documents to bring the narrative of past events to life. As is often the case with James, the story has a narrator who it's easy to read as being the author himself: "Some few years back I was staying with the rector of a parish in the West, where the society to which I belong owns property."

The things we learn in 'Martin's Close' (which turns out to be more of a traditional haunting than the majority of James's works) unfold initially through the narrator's visit to the nearby moors, where he is shown "one of the smallest enclosures you are likely to see – a very few square yards, hedged in with quick set on all sides, and without any gate or gap leading into it." This is the site, it transpires, where a hanged man is buried, the continuous hedging perhaps serving the purpose of restricting any supernatural wanderings that his restless spirit might fancy undertaking.¹ (Hedges without openings also happen to be a bit of a thing for James: the narrator of 'A View From A Hill' has to force his way through one such structure to escape his unobserved pursuers; and in 'Mr Humphrey's Inheritance' we have the brooding, impenetrable presence of the



story's ungodly yew maze.)

In 'Martin's Close', through the acquisition of a later short-hand account of a trial presided over by the real-life historical figure of Judge Jeffreys, we come to learn of what transpired on the rough upland pastures above the village between a member of the gentry, George Martin, recently returned to Devon from Cambridge, and a village girl, Ann Clark, "one to whom Providence had not given the full use of her intellects, but was what is termed among us commonly an innocent or natural". (In the autumn of 1685, Judge George Jeffreys – the notorious "Hanging Judge" – oversaw the "Bloody Assizes" in which he condemned to death hundreds of people involved in the ill-fated Monmouth Rebellion to overthrow James II.)

I love the way James layers his narrative, so that not only are we hearing a yarn told in a fragmentary, third-hand form to our narrator, but that the narrator then has to piece the rest together from an 18th-century account of the trial that itself has been compiled years after the event by the son of the man who took the original courtroom notes. These notes happen to be in an arcane shorthand that the narrator cannot decipher, so

he is forced to send them to an unnamed expert in such matters who can provide him with a typed English manuscript that acts as a translation. It's deliberately labyrinthine and playful.

Martin, seemingly as a way of teasing Ann and amusing himself, callously encourages her advances whenever he is passing through Sampford Courtenay. He regales her with a song titled 'Madam, will you walk, will you talk with me?', delighting in what he perceives as the ridiculousness of this girl with learning difficulties, whom he cruelly likens to a "hop-toad" or a flapping-winged goose (with an equivalent voice). For Martin it's a huge joke that she dares to think she's made a match with such a young man of quality. The joke backfires, however, when Martin's well-to-do fiancée learns of what has been taking place and abruptly calls off their engagement, setting off a grisly – and ghostly – chain of events. Unlike most of James's stories, however, the nature and reason for the terror that materialises is, for once, here in 'Martin's Close', easy to ascertain.

These days the area surrounding Sampford Courtenay is a sanitised agricultural landscape – though I suspect that at the time of

James's visit the wild tendrils of the moor would have reached out further. I head to the granite-blocked church of St Andrew, a building that still maintains its connections with James's King's College; I don't go inside because it's Sunday and I can hear the drone of the organ and the singing of a hymn – 'Now thank we all our God' – from behind the plain glass. The churchyard is pretty, bordered directly on one side by an old stone house whose windows press right up to the memorials. A large expanse of flowering ivy covers a tree in a corner close to the undersized headstones of infants' graves, and it is alive with the electric buzzing of bees and the scarlet-and-black of a pair of dawdling red admiral butterflies that are all engaged in a frenzy of nectaring. As I walk across the dew-tipped grass I find the surnames of the three witnesses from Martin's trial carved onto memorials – Arscott, Reddaway and Snell – which adds to the sense of authenticity that James's technique has already bestowed upon the story (and continues the practice that James began in his earlier story 'The Ash Tree' of using churchyard-inspired names in his tales).

I wander up the narrow main mediæval street to see if I can enter the 16th-century New Inn – a cream-coloured cob and thatched building at the crossroads in the centre of the village, prettified by various flowering hanging baskets; I'm still a little too early and it's not yet open for lunch. The inn features in James's story as the place where George Martin – the name is unfortunate, and keeps putting me in mind of The Beatles' producer – sometimes stays, and where, along with the proprietress Sarah Arscott and a solitary customer, they witness a wet-clothed form being blown inside by a gust of wind that extinguishes all the candles, entering the darkness of the room before concealing itself inside a cupboard. When they try to open the cupboard door

EDWARD PARNELL



EDWARD PARNELL

and apprehend whatever hides inside the shape flees, leaving a waterlogged trail upon the flagstones: “My lord, I cannot tell what it was, but it ran very low, and it was of a dark colour. We were both daunted by it, Thomas Snell and I, but we made all the haste we could after it to the door that stood open. And we looked out, but it was dark and we could see nothing.”

Coming round to the rear of the pub I happen upon a member of the bar staff, a woman who is just returning from walking her dog; they’re opening in half an hour, she tells me, and I ask her what must seem an odd question about the place’s history.

“Pauline’s who you want to speak to,” she says, “But she’s not in this morning.”

“I don’t suppose you know if there are any rumours about ghosts,” I ask, adding a little embarrassed, “I’m doing some research about a story in which the New Inn features.”

“There’s supposed to be the twin spirits of children. And an ex-landlord who was shot a couple of generations ago. If you come back this evening, Pauline will be able to tell you more.”

I thank her and start back towards the church.

“You can definitely feel something sometimes when you’re closing up, too,” she says, as I’m walking away.

The congregation has emerged into the graveyard and I slip past them with purpose. Inside the church, an interpretive display informs me of the Prayer Book Rebellion – on the face of things an

innocuous-sounding dispute about the introduction of the new Book of Common Prayer that translated the services of the now-Protestant Church from Latin into English, altering centuries-held religious rituals in the process. The Rebellion originated in Cornwall, moving back and forth into Devon. After 14 weeks it culminated, on 17 August 1549, in a decisive final battle on the edge of Sampford Courtenay in which hundreds of local rebels lost their lives to the forces of the 11-year-old King Edward VI, the son of Henry VIII. The Rebellion’s commander, Sir Humphrey Arundell, and three of his remaining lieutenants, were tried and sentenced to death at Westminster Hall. The condemned ringleaders of the Prayer Book Rebellion were drawn behind horses from the Tower of London to Tyburn, where they were hung until close to death, and disembowelled while still alive; their quartered remains were put on squalid public display at the entrance gates to the City as a grim warning and example.

Set against the acts we inflict upon each other, the horrors of our film and fiction can seem inconsequential in comparison.

¹ According to Westwood and Simpson’s *The Lore of the Land* (2005), “up to 1823, judges and coroners normally ordered that suicides and executed criminals should be buried beside or under a road (often but not necessarily at a crossroads), prolonging their punishment into the afterlife by depriving them of sacred funeral rites... A more speculative explanation sometimes offered by folklorists is that the choice of site was intended to bewilder the ghost, should it attempt to return.”

Stones). At the heart of its drama is the removal of one of the Neolithic stones from the garden of a cottage adjacent to the circle by workmen. As it is lifted an ominous wind blows, and from that point everything changes for the occupants of the house. It’s a pared-down, quietly effective piece – Jamesian in tone (think ‘Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad’), apart from its female lead and copious amounts of on-screen blood. It also happened to be the last of the sequence to be directed by Lawrence Gordon Clark. The following year’s *The Ice House* (written by John Bowen) is strange to the point of distraction (though it definitely has something about it) – in my eyes a kind of Robert Aickman meets Flann O’Brien.

And so, a golden age of grainy, melancholic ghost films came to an end on Christmas Day 1978 (though in 1979 audiences could take some solace in an episode of the BBC’s *Omnibus* that was an adaptation of the Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu’s story ‘Schalken the Painter’, directed by Leslie Megahey). Clark’s films – particularly, I would say, *A Warning to the Curious*, *Lost Hearts* and *The Signalman* – remain hugely atmospheric and frightening; if anything the passage of time renders them even more effective. I still feel a frisson of fear while walking around the pine trees of Wells Wood where *Warning* was filmed, and cannot hear a hurdy-gurdy being played without picturing that razor-nailed ghost boy from *Lost Hearts*; fortunately, it’s not a sound you hear every day.

There is a postscript, as BBC Christmas adaptations of James’s work returned belatedly, though arguably less atmospherically, to our screens after a three-decade absence. In 2005, Eleanor Yule’s *A View from a Hill* aired, followed by *Number 13* in 2006. A new version of *Whistle and I’ll Come to You* was screened on Christmas Eve, 2010, starring John Hurt, while Mark Gatiss made his directorial debut in 2013 with *The Tractate Middoth*.

Clark’s films from the 1970s, however, remain a difficult act to follow.

NOTES

¹ In folklore, ghosts had long been linked with Christmas Eve – a night, like Halloween, in which the boundary between this world and the Otherworld, the realm of the spirits, is said to be thin. For more detail on the history of telling ghost stories at Christmas and around midwinter see *Haunted Seasons* by Derek Johnston (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

♦ **EDWARD PARNELL** is the author of *Ghostland: In Search of a Haunted Country* published by William Collins, RRP £16.99. The book features more on MR James and the BBC’s ‘Ghost Story for Christmas’ strand.

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FURTHER VIEWING



Ghost Stories for Christmas, a 13-hour, six-disc set includes all 12 episodes from the classic series (1968–2006), plus *Classic Ghost Stories* presented by Robert Powell, the three MR James episodes of *Spine Chillers* (1980) and three episodes of *Ghost Stories for Christmas with Christopher Lee* (2000).

Ghost Stories for Christmas: Expanded Six-Disc Collection, BFI, 2013, £39.99 (DVD).

KEEPING MUMM

LISA GLEDHILL meets the mysterious men behind a curious Christmas custom that still persists in pubs and streets up and down the country every Boxing Day



WANTAGE MUMMERS

ABOVE: A 20-minute drama of death and resurrection is enacted each year in Wantage, Oxfordshire, when the mummery play is performed at the local pub.

At mid-day on Boxing Day about 300 people pitch up to watch a badly acted play in which a Saxon king fights a Napoleonic officer. One of them dies and is brought back to life by a quack doctor. The other one dies and is brought back to life by a Spanish mystic. A beggar asks for money and a soothsayer says a rhyme. It's all over in 20 minutes then everyone goes back to the pub. Next year, the same 300 people turn up and the play will be exactly the same, and they'll do the same the year after that and the year after that. Now you try and explain that!" So says Jim Birch, an associate of the Wantage Mummery based in Oxfordshire (mummery are a mysterious bunch and Jim doesn't wish to define his relationship more specifically than that.) Ross Healy of Yateley Mummery in Hampshire has a more succinct summary

"It's a bloody stabbing, death and resurrection on the pub floor"

of this seasonal entertainment: "It's a bloody stabbing, death and resurrection right there on your pub floor."

The mummery play is old – though probably not as old as some people have claimed.¹ It is performed in many parts of the country, usually at Christmas time. Texts vary regionally, as do the characters, but

they most likely share a common source. Most versions centre on a battle between a hero, such as St George or King Arthur, and a villain, often represented as a Turkish knight or Napoleonic figure. At least one character will be killed and resurrected. Texts are usually spoken in rhyming couplets and (whatever their earlier history) they've generally not changed much since they were captured by Victorian and Edwardian folklorists. "Mummery" originally meant a performance where the players are disguised, usually with masks, costumes or face paint. Even today many mummery are reluctant to identify themselves. It's as if the characters exist independently of the people reciting the lines.

So if there's no personal glory in mummery, it's not a survival of a pagan

ritual to keep the crops growing and there isn't any profit in it (although many groups raise a lot of money for charity) why on Earth do people still do it? "It's tremendous fun" says Ross. "It's fun to walk into a pub and surprise people with something they weren't expecting. We have a good team and we are very loud! The people are getting entertainment and from the landlord's point of view he's got a lot of enthusiastic locals giving it their all for free." Jim and his fellow associate of the Wantage Mummers, Sem Seaborne, agree that it's fun but Sem thinks there's a bit more to it. "Most of us believe it's an interesting anachronistic English tradition that is nice to support. Also, you've got to want to perform in front of the public and after that it's a bit of camaraderie. It's lads going out together like with cricket or football. There are other people who do it for the music or the crack or getting away from the family on Boxing Day."

If that sounds like your kind of thing and you want to know where to join up, you might not find it too easy. The groups I spoke to don't have auditions or formal waiting lists, their members are usually drawn from morris dancing or folk music groups and the recruitment process sounds a bit like joining the Freemasons. A potential mummer is likely to be sized up by a senior mummer and if he fits the bill it's a quiet nudge and a whispered invitation to join in. My sources didn't say whether there are also special passwords, handshakes and initiation ceremonies but perhaps it's best we don't know too much.

If you're a woman, it might be even trickier to make your mark in mumming. "There are female mummers," confirms Jim, "I've seen them on the Internet. They do exist." But Sem is a bit more cautious. "I've never seen any, but then that's not to say it's not going to happen sooner or later. We won't be around forever. I've got two daughters, they are 100 per cent supporters of the mummers and if I drop off the perch and no one else is doing it I am quite sure they will



WANTAGE MUMMERS

make sure something happens."

Mumming has often been a family affair, with scripts handed down through generations. In Uffington, near Wantage, the Bailey family are guardians of the village mummers play, which is only performed on very special occasions. A few miles further on, the Minns family look after a script for the Charney Basset play, which was written down in 1860. The families of the men I spoke to turn out in force to see the mumming and sometimes lend more than moral support. "I have to 'die' outside the pub on Boxing Day and I have to lie on the ground and it can be very cold or even snow and ice," says Ross. "I've had my family rush up with a blanket and a pillow and hot water bottle, and the crowd think it's hilarious."

You'd imagine that unscripted interventions from members of the public would be a common hazard for mummers performing around pubs in the party season. A few years back while watching mummers in Clun, on the Welsh borders, I saw a woman so emotionally overcome by the death of St George she decided to throw herself on top

of him and administer the kiss of life. Or something like that. Luckily (or unluckily depending on your point of view) the men I spoke to have never had to deal with anything so extreme. "Most people just regard mummers as pretty harmless idiots," says Jim.

"When we walk into a pub and start doing a play, we often get a mixed reception but rarely anything negative," says Ross. "We've had people who are playing a slot-machine and all this to-and-fro and shouting and murder are going on around them and they are completely oblivious."

"You will get the audience joining in with the lines they're familiar with," says Sem. "Like 'I've got pills to cure all ills, the itch, the stitch, the palsy and the gout.' Some people used to dress up to come, they felt they were a part of it. They've been listening to it for decades so it's hardly surprising." Jim thinks this could go further: "My ambition one year is to do it in mime and the audience will supply all the words. We do try for audience participation, we hold up boards saying 'Boo' and 'Hooray' when



YATELEY MUMMERS

TOP: The Wantage Mummers in action. **ABOVE LEFT:** King George inflicts a painful-looking injury on the enemy in the Yateley Mummers play. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Casualties line the streets of Yately as Old Father Christmas (and a small dog) survey the carnage.



WANTAGE MUMMERS

ABOVE: The characters of the Wantage Mummery play (clockwise from top left): Beau Slasher, Jack Vinney, King Alfred, Molly, Old Beelzebub, the Noble Dr Good.
BELOW: A photo of the 1977 Wantage Mummery play taking place outside the pub; prior to its 1975 revival, it had last been performed in 1881.

we want them to shout out and I'm really pleased that one year when the board got held up the wrong way round the audience shouted 'ooB'".

If all this sounds a bit like pantomime, you're dead right. They're both popular dramas, performed at Christmas, using stock characters and ritualised dialogue, so some cross-over of influence is inevitable.² The big difference is that pantos are performed by professionals (or by groups striving towards professional standards) and mumming is a proudly amateur effort. "Mumming is definitely not acting" says Jim. "Actors assume a character, mummery don't. We are cardboard cut-outs who stalk about declaiming with absolutely no characterisation at all." Sem warns: "If we started acting, there's a danger we would be mistaken for street theatre and people would throw bricks at us."

The style of performance may change but most mumming sides stick scrupulously to their chosen script. The Yateley play is largely based on a text recorded at Bramshill in Hampshire. "There are jokes that were probably hilarious in the 1800s that don't mean much now but we come out with them anyway and the crowd still seem to like it." says Ross.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the M4 the Wantage Mummery use a text recorded in the 1880s by the splendidly named Major

The text was recorded in the 1880s by Major Barzillai Lowsley

Barzillai Lowsley.³ The Wantage men have made a few small adjustments to their play. King George in the Barzillai version has been replaced by local boy King Alfred and Doctor Good is re-named Doctor Squires after a family of Wantage medics. What really makes the Wantage play distinctive is the wealth of topical sight-gags and the satirical review of the year delivered in verse by Old Father Beelzebub (it sounds sort of like Charlie Brooker crossed with



WANTAGE MUMMERS



HULTON ARCHIVE / GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: The Marshfield Mummers photographed in 1937. **BELOW:** The Marshfield play is thought to be one of the longest-running in Britain; recorded in the 1930s by a local clergyman and his sister, drawing on the memories of elderly parishioners, it is still performed today.

Rupert Bear). Sem says: “In the 40 years or so we’ve been involved, the play’s leant itself to a huge number of current events. Last year we wanted to get a referendum in the play and somehow we found a way of working it in. I think people are being a bit precious if they try to preserve folk traditions in aspic – they were never meant to be like that.”

Jim explains: “The audience never gets to see the funniest stuff. At the first rehearsal we run through all the fresh business and think up new scenarios and end up throwing most of it out as being far too tasteless. We’ve talked about a suicide belt gag but we think that would be a step too far.” Sem continues: “I think the reaction I was most concerned about was the year Donald Trump was elected President and Old Father Beelzebub had a slogan on his back that said ‘Make America Great Again’ but ‘great’ was crossed out and ‘vote’ was written instead. That was photographed, put on Facebook and in the USA it went viral. We were genuinely concerned because some of his supporters are a little unpredictable, shall we say? Fortunately, there wasn’t a reaction.”

One of the longest-running mumming traditions comes from Marshfield in Gloucestershire. The current version was recorded in the 1930s by that folklorist cliché, the local clergyman and his spinster



sister, drawing on the memories of elderly parishioners. It has been performed almost every Christmas since then. New performers must be lifelong Marshfield residents and must learn the words orally, never from a written script. Mumming is now an almost sacred part of the community’s identity.

The Wantage and Yateley Mummers plays have been going since the 1970s; that was a good time for mumming, with many new

groups inspired by the folk music revival. Compared to some mumming traditions, for example at Marshfield, they are Johnny-come-latelys, but it’s long enough to become an important part of what makes Christmas Christmas for three generations of people. “We get an audience of more than 600,” says Sem. “That’s how it is for people round here. They go out to watch the mummers, then for a Boxing Day drink, then home for their Christmas fry-up. It’s part of the routine.” In the words of Barzillai Lowsley’s script: “Zuch actin’ you never zee upon another staayge.”

For more information about the mummers featured in this article, including performance dates, see www.wantagemummers.org.uk and www.yateleymorrismen.org.uk

NOTES

1 For more on the origins of mumming, see <http://petemillington.uk/articles/mysteryhistory.php>, *Stations of the Sun* (1996) by Ronald Hutton and *The English Year* (2006) by Steve Roud

2 All together now – “Oh no it isn’t!”

3 *A Glossary of Berkshire Words and Phrases* (1888) by Major B Lowsley.

✦ **LISA GLEDHILL** is a film maker, writer and morris dance groupie with a long-standing interest in *forteana*.

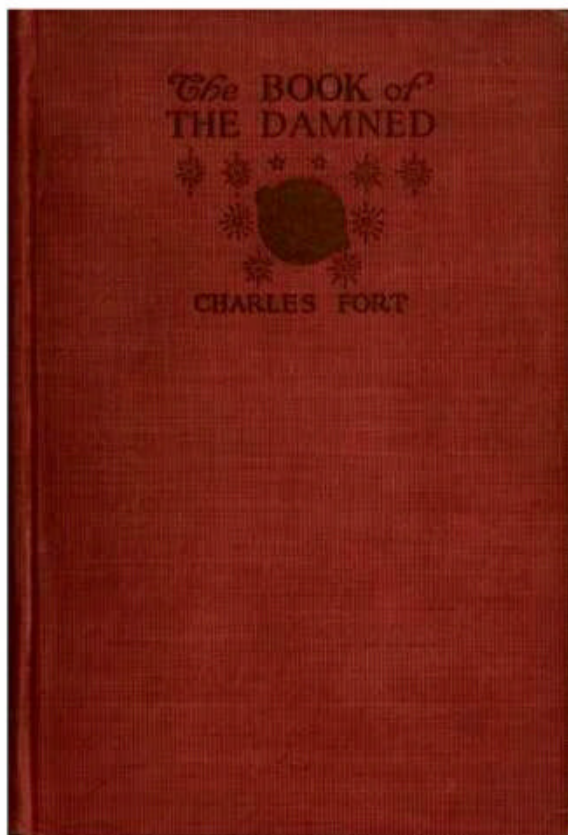
REVISITING THE BISHOP'S TORPEDO

A century after Charles Fort presented one of his “most remarkable” cases in *The Book of the Damned*, **MARTIN SHOUGH** and **WIM VAN UTRECHT** attempt to solve the mystery of the Bishop’s Torpedo, a strange fiery object that exploded over Burlington, Vermont, in 1907.

The story of the Bishop’s Torpedo – a peculiar “dark”, but fiery, body that exploded within view of several very reputable witnesses in Burlington, Vermont, on 2 July 1907 – has often been told. Capt. Edward J Ruppelt, head of Project Blue Book, wrote in an article for the USAF’s *Air Intelligence Digest* in 1952 that this case was one of “the most mystifying early-sighting reports on record.”¹ Charles Fort himself had called it “perhaps the most remarkable” of his cases because of the close-range observation.²

The principal witness was the Bishop of Burlington, the Most Reverend John Stephen Michaud, then 63 years of age, who happened to be standing on a street corner outside the Howard Bank in conversation with the former Governor of Vermont, Urban Andrain Woodbury (in office 1894-1896), and local worthy Mr AA Buell. Reports came from others including store-owner Alvaro Adsit and insurance company man WP Dodds, both nearby on College St, and a witness in the Strong Theatre on Main St.

“Without the slightest indication, or warning,” Bishop Michaud told Burlington meteorologist William H Alexander, who published his statement in the *Monthly Weather Review* of July 1907, “we were startled by what sounded like a most unusual and terrific explosion, evidently very nearby. Raising my eyes, and looking eastward along College Street, I observed a torpedo-shaped body, some 300ft [90m] away, stationary in appearance, and suspended in the air, about 50ft [15m] above the tops of the buildings. In size it was about 6ft [1.8m] long by 8in [20cm] in diameter, the shell, or covering, having a dark appearance, with here and there tongues of fire issuing from spots on the surface, resembling red-hot, unburnished copper. Although stationary when first noticed, this object soon began to move, rather slowly, and disappeared over Dolan Brothers’ store, southward. As it moved, the covering seemed rupturing in places,



“We were startled by what sounded like a terrific explosion”

and through these the intensely red flames issued.”

Fort remarks curtly that Bishop Michaud “attempts to correlate it with meteorological observations,” and this is Fort’s only reference to the weather. But the weather is noteworthy. The original article quotes Bishop Michaud’s observation that, although the sky above was clear, there was “an angry-looking cumulo-nimbus approaching from the northwest” and all sources agree that minutes after the event there was a heavy

LEFT: The first edition of *The Book of the Damned*, in which Fort presented the case of the Bishop’s Torpedo.

downpour of rain (one inch was measured in 35 minutes, a rate classified as an “extremely heavy” downpour).³ Moreover, this incident occurred during a period of more than two weeks when New England was being battered by a long series of exceptionally violent storms.

In 1998 a thorough article by Joseph Trainor in *Fortean Studies* collected numerous newspaper reports documenting the dramatic progress of these storms across the state between 23 June and 13 July 1907.⁴ The stories record destruction of property and crops by wind and hail; damage due to lightning strikes; fires and flooding; electric shock causing paralysis and injury to persons and death to horses and cows; and several cases of apparent ball lightning entering buildings. On 23 June in Newfane, Vermont, lighting entered a house “cutting a round hole in the carpet and making a smooth cut in the floor”. On 26 June lightning struck the steeple of Burlington Unitarian Church, etching a destructive path down to the basement where a ball of fire shot out of the furnace box. When a house was struck in Guilford on 9 July, two days after the Burlington “torpedo”, a mother and daughter were severely shocked and burned by a ball of fire that emerged from the kitchen water pump.

So the circumstantial case for “ball lightning” as a cause of the Bishop’s sighting seems suggestive, as asserted in the *Monthly Weather Review*. But we can also make a good circumstantial case for something even more mundane: an exploding balloon.

BALL LIGHTNING AND BALLOONS

Bishop Michaud is almost explicit in describing something like a rupturing fabric envelope as it is consumed from the inside by fire with a “terrific explosion”, all of which suggests a sausage-shaped hydrogen



ABOVE: A photograph from 1907, looking North up Church Street from where Bishop Michaud, Ex-Governor Woodbury, and Mr AA Buell were standing at the corner of Church Street and College Street. The Howard National Bank is the building on the street corner on the right. **BELOW:** Bishop Michaud.

balloon blowing up. If the explosion – which, according to another witness, stunned and felled a horse in the street – left any remnants at all they could have landed on the flat roof of one of the large buildings over which the object was seen to disappear.

Even in the absence of physical remains one might expect to find some evidence in other historical sources of such a balloon disaster, witnessed by prominent citizens and heard by people all over the city. The local office of the National Weather Bureau, publisher of *Monthly Weather Review*, was situated in Burlington just a mile from the sighting location; and the Burlington press would have good reason to be interested in following up a spectacular local balloon story, one would have thought. To be sure, ball lightning stories were always interesting; but balloon flights – especially disastrous ones – were major news in 1907. Yet no further reference to the Bishop’s “torpedo” is to be found in later issues of the *Burlington Free Press*, and a search for balloon companies and other ascents in Burlington in 1907 revealed nothing.

We did, however, discover that not too long before the Burlington sighting, in October 1906, elsewhere in New England, another



object had been seen that “resembled a big naval torpedo”. It passed over the small town of Fairfield, Connecticut, “very swiftly” with a noise like an automobile, and was believed to be an airship, although “no one observed anything like a basket or car suspended from it”.⁵

And in the town of Burlington itself, two years after the Bishop’s sighting, a very similar torpedo- or sausage-shaped balloon⁶

was launched from the City Market Grounds during the Lake Champlain Tercentenary Independence celebrations, 3-10 July 1909. Ascents were scheduled to take place daily from 5 July to 9 July that year.

By a remarkable coincidence a photo of this latter balloon was taken from Winooski Avenue, Burlington, just around the corner from where most of the interviewed witnesses were located in the 2 July 1907 sighting, while another picture was taken from a spot very close to the Strong Theatre on Main Street where another of the 1907 witnesses was located. It is almost as if the Bishop had a premonition of something that was to happen exactly two years later!

There even appears to have been an accident during one of the 1909 Tercentenary balloon ascents; and it may be thought relevant to the absence of further press comment on the events of 1907 that, whilst the debacle in 1909 is known to history, it was, according to historian Kevin Dann, the sort of historical detail that “tercentenary orators and pageant makers were keen to leave out of their story”.⁷ Had a similar discretion suppressed news of a failed Fourth of July balloon stunt in 1907? Or was this just a local prank or experiment with



ABOVE: The “dirigeable balloon” flown by Anthony Nassr for Tercentenary celebrations at Burlington in July 1909. **BELOW:** The Nassr dirigible flying over Main Street, Burlington, in July 1909. The Strong Hardware Company whose sign is on the right is also the location of the Strong Theatre.

a small fireworks balloon that went wrong? The perpetrator may have preferred to keep quiet about the exploit so as not to attract the ire of people who didn’t want exploding balloons and/or fire crackers threatening the wellbeing of their animals.

Note that the Bishop’s sighting occurred on the day before the traditional Independence Day firework celebrations were due to be staged across Vermont. For decades firecrackers had injudiciously been attached to hydrogen balloons launched for celebratory displays and accidental ignition was always a risk. Could the blast have been powerful enough to stun a horse in the street, or at least cause it to panic and fall, as reported?

MME ESPERT’S BALLOON

In the “ball lightning” literature, the Burlington case is not quite unique in its description of what resembles a rupturing shell or covering burning through from the inside. For example, the famous French scientist and politician François Arago (1786–1853) published details of a letter received from a witness to a similar apparition in Paris in 1849.⁸

On the suffocatingly sultry afternoon of 15 June⁹ the sky “appeared calm” but there was “heat lightning on all sides.” At 6.30pm Mme Veronique Espert looked from her window and saw what appeared to be “a large balloon or ball, very like the Moon”

Could the blast have been powerful enough to stun a horse?

descending towards a tree in nearby gardens. When about 23ft (7m) above the tree, the lower part of the ball “flamed out”, emitting sparks and small flames, and an opening appeared like a hole in burning paper, until with a “terrible explosion the envelope burst asunder” emitting 10 or 12 “zigzag lightnings.” These struck neighbouring houses, making a hole in the wall of one “like a cannonball” and knocking down and injuring various persons indoors and in the



street. A remnant of the object continued to burn with a “brilliant white flame”, spinning in the air, for one minute. The violent explosion, it was said, must have been heard across the city.

Should we attribute Mme Espert’s sighting to a manifestation of “ball lightning”? While we lack a scientific consensus on the physics of such phenomena, and consequently lack clarity about what their more curious properties may be, such a question remains at least partly semantic. Yet we should remember that 19th century French scientists, and Arago in particular, were inclined to label almost any unusual sky phenomenon as *foudre globulaire*, and this may be another example.

Summarising her letter, what Mme Espert saw was a “big red balloon... slowly descending”, which reminded her of a flight by a famous aeronaut.¹⁰ Soon “sparks” were seen to come out of the bottom side, which itself seemed to open up “like slowly burning paper with sparks and small flames”, after which a “terrible detonation” was heard and “rays of lightning escaped in all directions”, one of the projectiles creating a hole in a house. The final thing that was seen resembled a white flame that turned like a *soleil d’artifice* – a spinning, fiery firework like a Catherine wheel.

This is undeniably evocative of a balloon carrying fireworks that catches fire. Compare this description to the illustration of the *feu d’artifice* balloon flown over Paris for the 14 July celebrations in 1801 (below), showing the zigzagging rays of fireworks launched from a framework suspended below the balloon. Balloons carrying fireworks were used quite often in western European cities during the 19th century, and there were several accidents with them, perhaps the most famous being the hydrogen explosion that killed aeronaut Sophie Blanchard in 1819 in Italy.

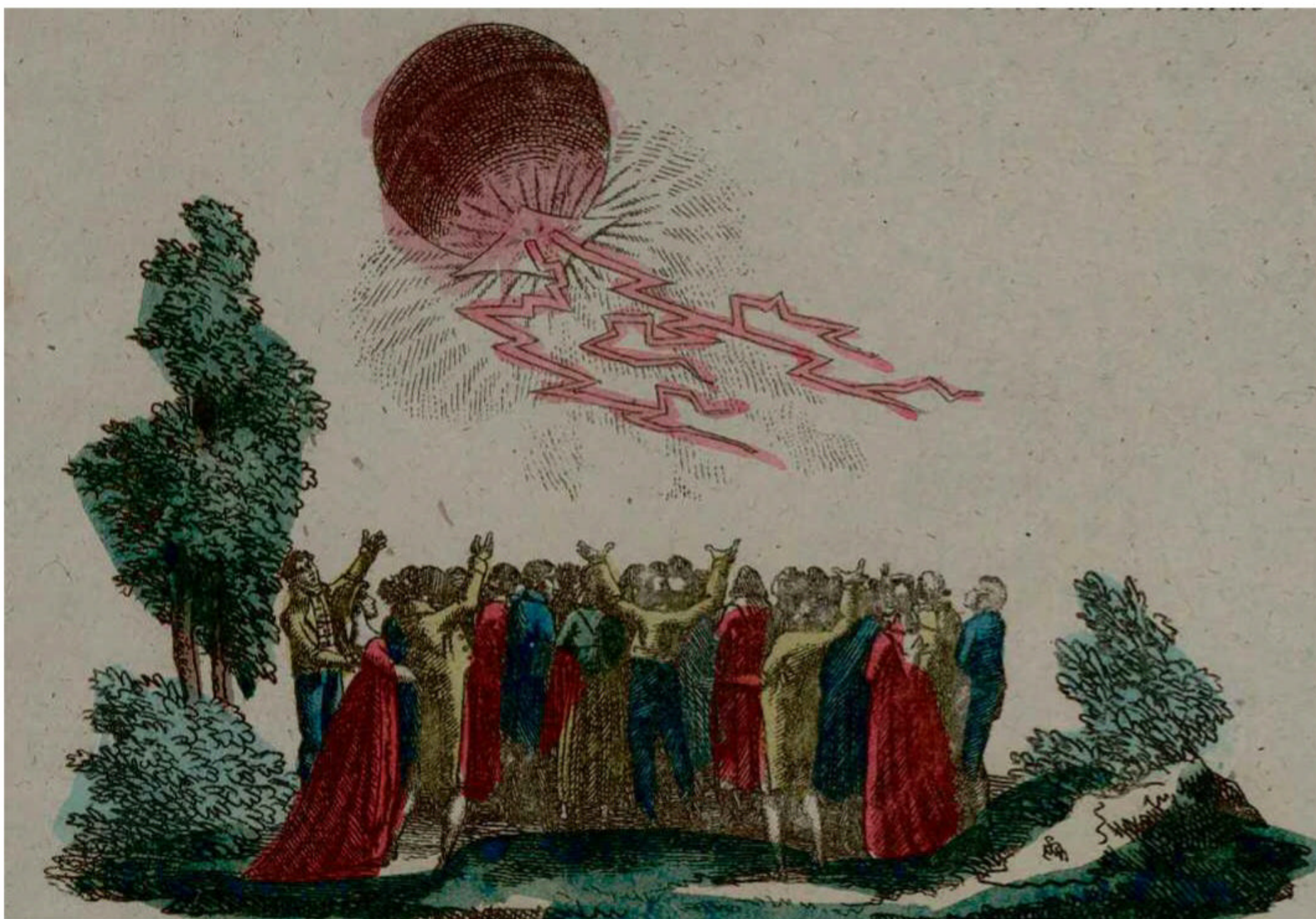
It may be significant that Mme Espert was looking in the direction of “les terrains de Beaujon”. It turns out that these aristocratic playgrounds were regularly used for such attractions during the 19th century, being “particularly known for their fireworks and hot air balloon flights”.¹¹ Perhaps what Mme Espert witnessed was an unmanned tethered balloon put up as part of a wedding or another private party. If so, there may have been nobody on board and therefore also no human casualties when it caught fire, helping to explain why the stray rockets and the burning balloon appear not to have made the news. In the light of Mme Espert’s own statement that the sighting happened on the very day the cholera outbreak peaked in the

city, we can speculate that there were more important matters to occupy the front pages.

True, Mme Espert saw “heat lightning” on this otherwise calm evening, but the text of her letter says that the window she was viewing from was very low and that the ball appeared over a tree on the terrains de Beaujon. A low window suggests a limited view. So it would be perfectly logical to assume that what Mme Espert described as “heat lightning” was the light from fireworks set off during the same celebration at the Beaujon site. Speculating further, perhaps a spark or a projectile hit the balloon and started the fire, which in turn set off the pyrotechnics that were attached to the balloon. The witness’s description is, in fact, typical of the type of pyrotechnics that balloons carried in those days: a dozen or so rockets attached to a ring suspended from the balloon and shooting in all directions when ignited.

A mishap with a balloon seems much the simpler explanation here, compared with a bizarre and unproven type of free-floating ball lightning, a phenomenon which itself is still controversial. And the same might be said of the Burlington “torpedo” of 1907.

Still, in the latter case there are other circumstances worth considering before we leave it.



ABOVE: A *feu d’artifice* balloon launching fireworks over Paris for 14 July National Day celebrations in 1801



ABOVE LEFT: The death of aviator Sophie Blanchard when her hydrogen balloon was ignited by fireworks in 1819. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Suspension methods for pyrotechnics carried by *feu d'artifice* balloons, as seen in the catalogue of the Unexcelled Fireworks Company, New York, 1884.

BANDS OF LIGHT

As chronicled in Trainor's *Fortean Studies* article, not only did the incident occur in the midst of a notable spate of thunderstorms right across New England, there had also been several "severe" earthquake shocks in the area of Kittery, Maine, around the end of June; and on 6 July – the day before the Burlington "torpedo" – a final tremor shook the town for several seconds. Then on the night of 10 July between about 8.45 and 9.30, many communities in the region observed an extraordinary display of what became widely (but dubiously) characterised as "zodiacal light".

An arc of light appeared across the sky from horizon to horizon. In Lewiston and Auburn, "it caused much excitement and the [Lewiston] *Sun* office telephone was kept busy with people calling up about it". In Brunswick, Maine, 16 miles (26km) away "a great band of light appeared" spanning the sky from east to west. When first seen "it was very bright" and "passed through the middle of the constellations Aquila and Bootes," said the *Boston Herald*. The *Brunswick Record* agreed that "The ring [phenomenon] passed through the constellation of Aquila, being over the Alpha star." From the Biddeford

area it appeared as "a mysterious band of white light crossing the skies from east to west in a complete grand circle. The strange spectacle somewhat resembled the formation of a rainbow in outline, but there was no distribution of different bright hues. Instead an intense white glow characterised the entire sweep of this luminous girdle that extended from horizon to horizon. For fully 30 minutes this unusual band of light maintained its integrity. Then it gradually faded out, entirely disappearing in the course of half an hour."

There was speculation that it "must be of extra-terrestrial character," a theory which seemed to many to be "confirmed by the brilliant display of the aurora borealis in the northerly heavens immediately following the disappearance of the great streamer". But local astronomers opined that it must have been zodiacal light. "It is only at rare intervals that it is seen in this latitude," commented the *Biddeford Daily Journal*, echoing the *Brunswick Record's* report. It was seen by many in the city of Portland, "stretching from one horizon to the other in an east and west direction, and [it] puzzled everyone who happened to glance skyward during the hour it was visible".¹²

The zodiacal light is caused by sunlight reflected from dust in space. The dust lies in a ring or disc around the Sun, in the plane of the planets' orbits – the ecliptic plane – and Earth is embedded in it. Therefore, we see it as a streak of faint light in the night sky lying along the line of the ecliptic, which runs through the zodiac constellations – hence the name. It usually appears near the horizon just behind the setting Sun or just ahead of the rising Sun.

However, there are several reasons for doubting that this phenomenon was the zodiacal light. The first is the apparent localisation of the sightings to an area of southern Maine encompassing about 1,440 square miles (3,730km²) bounded by Lewiston, Bath and Kennebunkport.¹³

The zodiacal light ought to appear the same for observers elsewhere on Earth at a similar latitude. We have searched for other references to unusual displays in 1907 without success. Could it be that only this small area of southern Maine around Portland happened to be free of cloud cover on the evening of 10 July? It is possible, but the US Department of Agriculture weather maps show clear skies across most of the western states on both days, and plenty



ABOVE: The Maine sky at 9pm local solar time, showing the ecliptic (the pink line near the horizon) – with Aquila and Boötes outlined in white, well above it.

of clear sky on the eastern seaboard too. Of course, these daily maps cannot reflect small-scale variability. But it seems likely that other factors might be involved.

Secondly, neither the date, nor the latitude, nor the local conditions were optimum for seeing the zodiacal light at all. It certainly helps that there was no Moon that night (it had set ahead of the Sun), and it is possible that the east coast atmosphere was washed clean of smoke and dust particulates after many days of stormy weather. However, even on a night of excellent visibility in a dark rural area, the zodiacal light is a faint conical patch and is rarely detectable more than about 20° or 30° from the horizon; yet this was a sky-spanning band of light notable for its completeness and brightness, which apparently commanded attention in towns and cities.¹⁴

The zodiacal light is best seen in spring or autumn near the equator. At the latitude of New England, the best chance of an evening view would be in spring, February to April, when the plane of the ecliptic cuts the horizon at its steepest angle so that the light rises up near-vertically into the darker part of the sky, and the faint pyramid would appear in the west. The next favourable window occurs before dawn from September, when the light appears in the east. 10 July is less than three weeks from midsummer, which is the worst possible time of year for either.

To see the entire zodiacal band at all is an outstandingly rare event, even in the best atmospheric conditions, in the best mountain locations, at the best near-equatorial latitudes, and at the optimum time of the year. For it to appear “very bright” from the urban streets of Maine

in summer – so bright that many amazed citizens called their local newspapers – would be unprecedented and probably unrepeated.

Thirdly, the position of the band does not fit the zodiacal light. According to the newspapers, the band passed through the constellation Aquila – actually crossing Alpha Aquilæ, the bright star Altair – and through the constellation Boötes. If these positions are even approximately reliable, then the path must have been something like 30° higher than the ecliptic where the zodiacal light appears. Combined with the localisation to the Portland coastal area, and the highly unfavourable date/conditions, this seems strong evidence that the band was not zodiacal light.

So what was it? The coincidence with a period of intense atmospheric electricity bears thinking about, but it isn’t clear what the causal link, if any, might be. We are reminded of those arches of luminosity that sometimes accompany auroral displays during solar storms and it is very suggestive that the Biddeford newspaper mentions a “brilliant display of the aurora borealis in the northerly heavens immediately following the disappearance of the great streamer.” An Internet search turned up no other evidence of unusual auroral displays at the time, which is not too surprising as the date was 17 months after the last, mediocre, solar maximum,¹⁵ but the mechanism of such effects is not well understood, so a connection can’t be ruled out.

A recently recognised type of spectacular narrow streamer nicknamed STEVE may stretch from horizon to horizon, and seems to accompany a narrow magnetic jet of ions that occurs high in the ionosphere and further south than ordinary auroral

emissions. STEVE is not fully understood, but always occurs in conjunction with an aurora, typically before local midnight, and lasts up to an hour or so, all of which fits the Maine phenomenon lasting from about 8.45 to 9.30 pm.¹⁶ As an auroral arch occurs at high altitude – probably at 100km (60 miles) or more – and STEVE streamers are probably even higher, these types of theory are, like the zodiacal light theory, vulnerable to the argument that the arc ought to have been more widely observed. Nevertheless, STEVE seems the best fit.

POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

Returning finally to the exploding body in the sky over Burlington: could an unusual aurora-related phenomenon be in any way connected with atmospheric effects near the ground? The idea seems tenuous. Phenomena like sprites, blue jets, and elves, reaching high above thunderstorms, hint at the until-recently unsuspected vertical connectivity of atmospheric electrical events. There are some reasonable theories positing an electrical coupling between the ionosphere and the ground via channels such as meteor plasma trails, and it has been seriously suggested that charge brought to earth in this way might explain some cases of ball lightning.¹⁷ But as an explanation of the specific and unusual details of the Bishop’s “Torpedo”, such ideas are perhaps not very useful.

The exploding hydrogen balloon theory seems rather persuasive, even though some questions remain. For example, one would expect such a hydrogen explosion to have immediately destroyed a fragile balloon. Yet Michaud, Woodbury and Buell were alerted first by that stunning explosion which was heard across the city, and only then did they



LEFT: An image of STEVE (Strong Thermal Emission Velocity Enhancement) caught by Elfie Hall from Alberta, Canada, in August 2015. **FACING PAGE:** Map of the sighting area assembled from 1907 sources, showing witness locations (stars) and possible motion of the object.

have been developed reflect this fact, for example producing nested concentric shell-like surfaces by the self-organisation of charged dusts in dusty plasmas. According to one study, “the collected data showed that ball lightning can have an internal structure (as if it is made of honeycombs, or caviar), sparks were observed inside and outside of it... It has also grey and black colours.”¹⁹ Another comments: “In general there are three structural types. First a solid appearance with a dull or reflecting surface or a solid core within a translucent envelope; second a rotating surface, suggestive of internal motion and stress; and third, a structure with a burning appearance.”²⁰

Consider some eyewitness descriptions:

“[A] big storm cloud had approached... the dust sank and I could see a large ball... smoothly rolling and swiftly jumping in the field... Its colour was a mixture of yellow, orange, and brown. There was a halo around it. The halo consisted of vortices of dust with a dusty grey-yellow colour... Getting through the pane, the ball was elongated like a rubber ball, taking an ellipsoidal form. After this it regained its spherical form... When it was moving in the corridor, it was elongated and resembled a big melon. The ball covered 15m [49ft] from the house to the vegetable garden; there it met a cherry tree. Without exploding, it decayed into fire shreds of 150-200mm [6-8in] size. They were hanging for a short time on branches and glowing, after that the tree caught fire. Soon after this, lightning struck and rain began, but the tree was still on fire. In density, the ball resembled orange-coloured smoke clouds, different in density, brighter and more yellow in the centre. The ball also resembled a balloon filled with smoke.”

“[T]here was a dry thunderstorm, and lightning was observed without rain... Its form was elongated and resembled a long lemon with a thin end, or a pear, 150-160mm [6-6.3in] in size. Its colour was blue-yellow, slightly dirty. The surface seemed to be smeared and vibrating... The fireball disappeared with a flick. A thunderstorm with rain broke out 20 minutes later.”

“It was the beginning of a thunderstorm... it jumped in a similar fashion to a gas balloon... the ball decayed into three big pieces of a shell shape and several further smaller pieces. The collection resembled a broken pomegranate with red grains on the ground. The destruction of the ball was viscous, similar

look up to see the object, intact apart from what appeared to be small fiery “spots... here and there”, beginning to move away, passing out of sight “over Dolan Brothers’ store”. Yet other witnesses said that “it struck the centre of College Street near the Standard Coal and Ice Company,” still another that it exploded “18 or 20 feet [5.4–6m] off the ground... in front of the Hall furniture store.” (It is confusing to try to plot the object’s real position and movement from these witnesses’ locations and lines of sight. An attempt is shown on the opposite page, but it is not clear if these descriptions can be made consistent.)

It’s true that ball lightning, too, is often said to disappear when it explodes. On the other hand, a thunderclap associated with a lightning flash is frequently reported to herald the appearance of a “lightning ball”, which could fit the sequence reported. A sky that was “entirely clear” overhead might seem unlikely for such an extreme and unusual type of ball lightning. But in the absence of reliable physics, the fact is we don’t know what ideal atmospheric conditions might be.¹⁸ In a NASA survey,

about 35 per cent of cases happened either near the beginning of a storm or with “no storm” occurring (6 per cent had “no storm connected” at all); while at Burlington there was in fact an “angry-looking cumulonimbus” thundercloud visible. It was at high enough elevation to be seen from a town street where nearby buildings would almost certainly have obstructed the horizon, so it would have been quite near and it was “approaching”. The rainstorm began soon after. The ongoing spell of fierce thunderstorms over the whole New England area, with other “ball lightning” reports in the district in this timeframe, is context that merits being borne in mind.

And it is possible to find examples in the modern ball lightning literature which report shell-like structures and membrane-like surfaces, at least hinting at a possible relation to the Burlington object. Numerous cases exist of balls appearing to deform elastically and “bounce”, to exhibit grey or metallic-appearing surfaces, to contain onion-like nested layers, to split in two or more, or to burst open. And it is notable that many of the theoretical models that

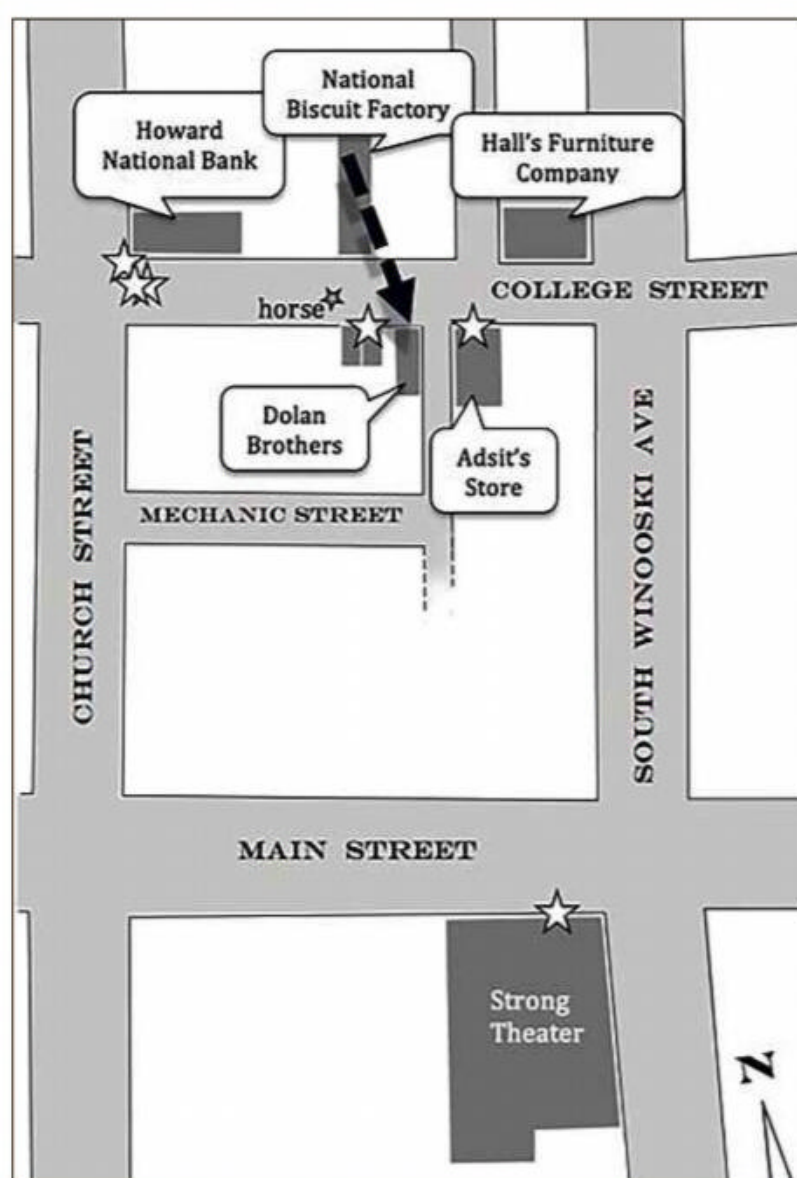
to snow rolled-up into a snowball, whose structure is laminated. Parts disappeared non-simultaneously.”

“It was golden orange, and the colour inside the 700mm [28in] diameter core was more intense. ... On the boundary a lot of objects resembling small snowflakes were observed... In the corridor it broke into yellow-orange snowflakes with a loud sound, about 5-5.5m [16-18ft] from us. The sound was as strong as thunder.”

“It was rather cool after a thunderstorm... The ball resembled a gel of white-grey colour. Its boundary was like a soap bubble... Inside the ball (at 1/3 of its diameter) the glow was more intense than outside.”²¹

For some reason, historical examples of this type are rare, however. In a 19th century example from Scotland, “a ball of fire... fell gradually to pieces or powder, in a manner like to a shell of quicklime when slaked; the gleaming powder streaming down the thatch amid the pouring rain, but doing the roof no injury”.²² But we find only one case in the historical ball lightning catalogues we searched – the 1849 sighting in Paris by Mme Espert – that bears an almost exact resemblance to what Bishop Michaud described, and that incident can plausibly be explained as a fireworks balloon that caught fire.

We cannot prove that the Bishop’s Torpedo was a balloon, or that it was a rare type of



ball lightning; but we can make a reasonable circumstantial case for both. At any rate, we see no evidence that it supports Charles Fort’s exotic theories, or those of his modern ufological descendants. Do any of the other

81 aerial phenomena in *The Book of the Damned* do so?

Some can be quite confidently explained; often, as in this case, we are able to suggest a menu of plausible options; but several cases still resist our best efforts. Will they ultimately prove explicable without recourse to exotic theories?



This article is extracted and adapted from *Redemption of the Damned Vol. 1 Aerial Phenomena: A Centennial Re-evaluation of Charles*

Fort's 'Book of the Damned', published by Anomalist Books (anomalistbooks.com) and is available from Amazon (\$39.99/£27.99)

♦ **MARTIN SHOUGH** is the author and co-author of various books, articles, papers, and reports, and has been involved in a number of notable investigations. He is a Research Associate for the National Aviation Reporting Center on Anomalous Phenomena (NARCAP).

♦ **WIM VAN UTRECHT** initiated CAELESTIA, a research initiative that seeks to find explanations rather than promote mysteries and, together with Frederick Delaere, he set up the Belgisch UFO-meldpunt to monitor UFO reports in Belgium. He is the co-author of two books on UFOs.

NOTES

1 http://nicap.org/articles/ruppelt_aid_draft.htm.

2 Charles Fort, *Book of the Damned*, p. 279, citing *Monthly Weather Review*, 1907, p310.

3 http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/media/pdf/4/1/No._03_-_Water_in_the_Atmosphere.pdf.

4 Joseph Trainor, ‘The Bishop’s Torpedo – A New England UFO of 1907,’ *Fortean Studies* Vol. 4 (ed. Steve Moore), John Brown Publishing, London, 1998, pp132-150.

5 “Airship that startled farmers”, *Daily Record*, Long Branch, NJ, 27 Oct 1906.

6 The Tercentenary airship was a “Nassr’s dirigeable balloon”. Anthony M Nassr (1880-1960) was a professional balloon and airship maker and exhibition pilot from Toledo, Ohio, going by the name of “The Daring Syrian”, who made his first balloon ascent in 1900. See: www.ballooninghistory.com/whoswho/who%27swho-n.html.

7 Kevin Dann, *Pageants, Parades, and Patriotism: Celebrating Champlain in 1909*, Vermont Historical Society, 2009, p97.

8 Quoted in: *Oeuvres complètes de François Arago*, Tome Quatrième, Paris/Leipzig, 1853, pp54-56.

9 This date is given in some sources whereas Arago’s quotation gives 16 June. The reason may be that 16 June 1849 was a Saturday, not a Friday, and Mme. Espert seems confident that the incident happened on a Friday. This could be a print error, a witness error, or a consequence of ambiguous handwriting by Mme Espert. Howsoever, the exact date is uncertain. See: *Cosmos, Revue Encyclopédique Hebdomadaire, Des Progrès des Sciences*, Vol. 1, Paris, 1852, p. 350; “The Thunderstorm” *Scientific American Supplement* 10:40-45, 1880.

10 She wrote “M. Grimm”, but was probably referring to balloonist Mr Green who was well known in Paris at the time. Actually, Mr Green had made a “Grand Night Ascent” from the Royal Gardens at Vauxhall, near London, three weeks before Mme

Espert’s sighting.

11 <http://paristoric.com>.

12 Sources cited by Joseph Trainor (*ibid.*): *Boston Herald*, 7 July 1907; *Lewiston Daily Sun*, 11 July 1907; *Boston Herald*, 11 July 1907; *Brunswick Record*, 12 July 1907; *Biddeford Daily Journal*, 11 July 1907; *Portland Evening Express*, 11 July 1907.

13 Trainor, op. cit.

14 In 1910 Portland was a city of 58,570. Biddeford had a population of 17,079, and Brunswick 6,806 (US Census).

15 The peak of Solar Cycle 14 (Sept 1902-Dec 1913) had occurred in February 1906. We found records of a “beautiful display” four months before the sightings, on 11 Mar 1907, which did make a “grand spectacle” for observers in Maine (*Lewiston Sun Journal*, 12 Mar 1907).

16 Elizabeth A MacDonald, *et al.*, “New science in plain sight: Citizen scientists lead to the discovery of optical structure in the upper atmosphere”, *Science Advances*,

14 Mar 2018: Vol. 4, No. 3.

17 Stephen Hughes, ‘Green fireballs and ball lightning,’ *Proc. Roy. Soc. A* (2011) 467, 1427-1448.

18 Mark Stenhof, *Ball Lightning: An Unsolved Problem in Atmospheric Physics*, Kluwer Academic, 1999.

19 VL Bychkov, *Unsolved Mystery of Ball Lightning*; https://www.springer.com/cda/content/document/cda_downloadaddocument/

20 MP Sriram, *An Experimental Model of Ball Lightning*, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 2004.

21 John Abrahamson, AV Bychkov and VL Bychkov, “Recently reported sightings of ball lightning: observations collected by correspondence and Russian and Ukrainian sightings” *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. Lond. A* 2002 360, doi: 10.1098/rsta.2001.0917, 15 Jan 2002.

22 <http://www.ball-lightning.info/Ball-lightning/Gloma.html>, citing Dr Henry Muirhead, *Symons’ Monthly Meteorological Magazine*.



RETURNING JAPANESE

SD TUCKER continues to report on rising nationalism in Japan, where Jesus Christ has now returned as a politician, offering salvation to those who lend Him their vote – and death to those who do not.

The Japanese are used to being led by gods reborn. Following the forcible exposure of the nation to international trade by US warships in 1853, Japan's rulers made the humiliating realisation their Western adversaries were light years ahead in technological and military terms, and sought answers as to why. One possible solution was that the *gaijin* ('foreign devils') professed allegiance to a single God, which proved a unifying force for Christian civilisation. Just as *gaijin* obeyed their single deity, so they obeyed the single authority of their governments, making them an effective military force, went the argument. Maybe, if the confusion of minor gods, or *kami*, which populated Japan's native animist nature-cult of Shinto, was sidelined and the nation united under a single idol, the West could one day be matched. The 'god' chosen was the Emperor, previously a largely symbolic guardian of quaint customs, who was painted in the new 'State Shinto' as being, literally, the divine descendent of the Sun-goddess Amaterasu. Japan's constitution of 1889 made this claim official, and blind obedience to the embodied Sun-god was encouraged.

With his coronation in 1926 Japan's most notorious Emperor, Hirohito, was formally reborn as an *arahitogami*, or 'god in human form', and dangerous forces of nationalism were unleashed which culminated in Japan's sacred battle of WWII. Defeat therefore came as a shock to much of Japan's population, a blow doubled during a speech Hirohito was forced to deliver on 1 January 1946. Known as the 'Humanity Declaration', it contained a grovelling admission that tales of *arahitogami* were mere "legends and myths", and spoke of "the false conception that the Emperor is divine". Japan's new god-like ruler, US General Douglas MacArthur, made sure to release a photo of him looking powerfully relaxed standing next to a submissive-looking Hirohito, dressed in absurdly antiquated formal attire. Not only was Hirohito no god, the victor's message went, he was actually a puny weakling.¹

NATIONAL SUICIDE

Some die-hard conservatives refused to accept this downgrading of the Emperor's status, notably the nationalist poet and author Yukio Mishima (see FT376:54-55), as

shown in his short story *Voices of the Heroic Dead*. Here, the souls of dead *kamikaze* pilots speak from within the Shinto shrine of Yasukuni, where Japan's soldiers (and Class-A war-criminals) find their final resting-place, asking mournfully: "Why did the Emperor become human?" This was a question Mishima was also asking, viewing Hirohito's 1946 speech as a betrayal of Japan's holy war dead. So preoccupied with the issue did Mishima become that on 25 November 1970, together with four members of his personal far-right militia, the Shield Society, Mishima tried to stage a coup by tying up a Japanese army commandant and making a speech to troops from his Tokyo balcony, telling them to rise up and restore Hirohito as their heavenly Sun-Lord. When the soldiers just laughed, Mishima ritually disembowelled himself with a sword, an old samurai trick termed *seppuku*. "Madman!" "Idiot!" "Japan is at peace!" the soldiers yelled; but what did Mishima expect from young men raised in what had become a helpless and brainwashed American quasi-colony over the past 25 years?

He had tried to convince the soldiers that, thanks to their so-called 'Peace Constitution', they officially didn't even

exist. According to Article 9 of this forcibly imposed, US-penned document, "the Japanese people forever renounce war as a sovereign right of the nation", and all national "land, sea and air-forces, as well as other war-potential, will never be maintained", thereby preventing another Pearl Harbor. With the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950, however, the US thought better of this, and encouraged Japan to re-arm against Cold War Communism. The result was the Self-Defence Force (SDF), now one of the biggest militaries on Earth, but which is legally never allowed to be used except in self-defence, should the Japanese mainland ever be attacked by Pyongyang. In 1959, Japan's Supreme Court legally ruled that this army was *not* an army, and its troops *not* troops; Mishima was trying to get the SDF to realise the absurdity of their dishonourable position as mere toy soldiers and demand the repeal of Article 9. Very possibly, he had *expected* to be rejected, and deliberately planned the whole thing as an act of extreme, self-negating satire.

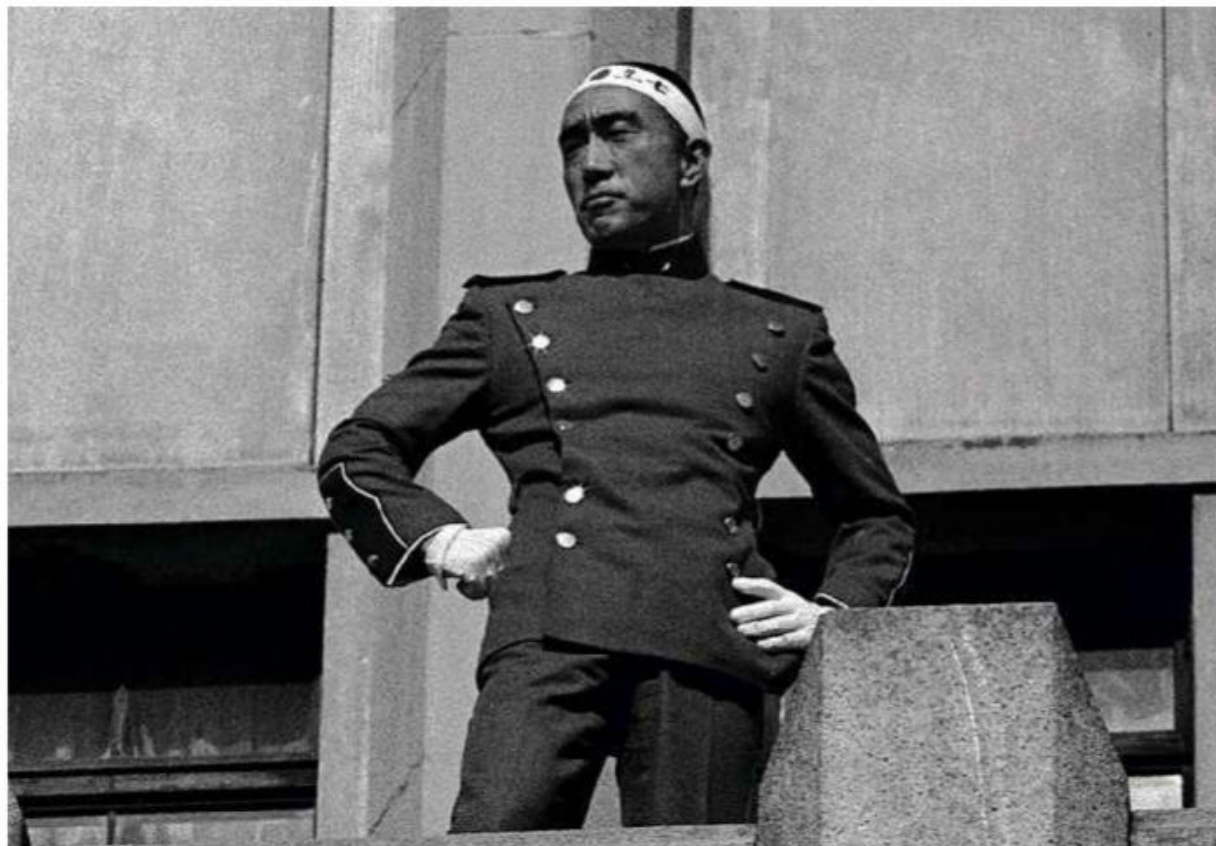
Obsessed with slapstick tales of ancient samurai failing to commit *seppuku* due to blunt swords and other such ineptitude, which he found hilarious, Mishima's own suicide played out like a violent farce. After disembowelling himself, he lay on the floor waiting for his disciple and gay lover Morita Masakatsu to end his agony by ritually beheading him – but Morita kept on missing, hacking Mishima's shoulders and back, before another, more qualified, militia member stepped in to finish the job properly. Knowing that in Zen Buddhism comedy often comes close to wisdom, it may be that Mishima was trying to make a sardonic point: an Americanised Japan had become so enfeebled that its modern-day samurai could no longer even kill themselves properly. The fact that his death, rather than inspiring divine mass-uprising, merely led to profane mass-media sensation, with lurid photos of his severed head fuelling record sales of that day's newspapers, only proved Mishima's point.²

Whilst Mishima's death seemed futile, even laughable, at the time, the recent resurgence of Japanese nationalism has seen reassessment of the poet's ideas, with a number of commentators agreeing that US-imposed Western values have indeed



ABOVE: General Douglas MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito photographed in January 1946.

THE ASAHI SHIMBUN VIA GETTY IMAGES



JUJI PRESS / APP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE LEFT: Right wing activist Shusuke Nomura speaks during a press conference on 13 January 1987. Six years later, he shot himself dead at a Tokyo newspaper office.
ABOVE RIGHT: Yukio Mishima delivering a speech to Japanese Self-Defence Force soldiers at Tokyo's military garrison station on 25 November 1970 before committing *seppuku*.

infantilised the nation and calling for the repeal of Article 9. In 2002, the museum at Yasukuni Shrine mounted an exhibition claiming Hirohito had used a clever verbal trick in his 1946 speech and so had *not* denied he was Amaterasu's descendant after all – and if the Emperor really *was* a god, then why not continue to worship him? Indeed, why not kill yourself in his name? In 1993, political extremist Shusuke Nomura produced two pistols from within his kimono and messily shot himself dead through the stomach in the offices of the liberal *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper in protest at it mocking his fringe nationalist Wind Party in a cartoon. In 2014, Japanese PM Shinzo Abe revived memories of this incident by appointing an ultraconservative academic, Michiko Hasegawa, to the governing board of NHK, Japan's BBC equivalent, apparently not put off by a recent essay she had distributed praising Nomura's *seppuku*-by-shooting. "There could be no better offering" to the Emperor than putting a bullet through your abdomen, wrote Hasegawa, arguing that, as Nomura had bowed towards the Palace of the Sun-Lord prior to pulling the trigger, "His Imperial Highness, even if momentarily, became a living god again, no matter what the 'Humanity Declaration' says."³

In 2000, Japan's then-PM Yoshiro Mori caused further alarm by declaring his land "a nation of gods centred on the Emperor". Despite the best efforts of Communist-controlled teachers, Mori said that he and his predecessors in the governing LDP Party had "been working for 30 years" to restore a greater role for Shinto within schools, and had even dedicated an annual national

NOMURA SHOT HIMSELF DEAD THROUGH THE STOMACH

holiday to celebrating Hirohito's birthday, called 'Showa Day'. Mori also deliberately used the now-taboo term *kokutai*, or 'sacred national identity', the religio-ideological banner under which Hirohito's troops had fought; imagine if Angela Merkel began promising voters a Fourth Reich and you get the general idea.

Mori easily brushed off the controversy, with publication of the LDP's manifesto for that year's upcoming elections being very publicly delayed so a new passage could be inserted about Japan being a sacred nation in which "the gods reside in the mountains, rivers, grass and trees", but one in which "the hearts of the Japanese people are [now] weary, and patriotism that respects the ancient and good Japanese tradition and culture has weakened", thanks to Marxist fifth columnists. The LDP promised to fix this Commie-inspired cultural malaise by ensuring more official visits were made to the Yasukuni ghosts, regardless of the distress this caused Japan's war victims abroad. The LDP thought there were votes in extreme Shinto nationalism; policy-chief Shizuka Kamei defended Mori's comments, saying they "will function as a *kamikaze* that will help the LDP" to win the approaching

election – which they did.⁴ Certain political elements in Japan once more seem ready, then, to accept an *arahitogami* as their leader... the question is, which one should they choose?

LAND OF THE RISEN SON

As Divine Emperor, Hirohito never had to ask his subjects to vote for him, but since the Japanese were emancipated at the barrel of a gun, even the greatest of gods in human form must seek democratic approval. Consider the case of Jesus Christ, whose Second Coming occurred on 5 February 1944 in the city of Ginowan on Japan's southernmost Island-Prefecture of Okinawa, his name being recorded on his birth-certificate as plain old Mitsuo Matayoshi.

After an obscure youth about which theologians can only speculate, Jesus graduated from the Business School of Tokyo's Chuo University in 1968, before establishing a private after-school revision class in his native Okinawa. Following time spent hawking his message in the guise of a Protestant preacher, in 1997 Jesus of Ginowan entered local politics after growing concerned about environmental issues; his brother Yoshio was already a big force in regional government, so he may have drawn divine inspiration from him. Soon, Jesus felt confident enough to reveal his true identity, setting up the World Economic Community Party and having the new title 'Matayoshi Jesus' printed on campaign leaflets. To prove that, truly, this man was the Son of God, Matayoshi filled these flyers with stock images of Christ onto which he had crudely Photoshopped an over-large image of his own head. He also procured a mini-van to



which he attached loudspeakers and drove it around his neighbourhood, ranting in a strange and angry *kabuki*-style voice, to spread the Word.⁵

But what was Jesus's message to his flock? According to a 2009 campaign-poster, his was a surprisingly belligerent creed: "Matayoshi Jesus, the One True God, states that certain people must slice their bellies open and die." Specifically, those persons most in need of being forced to commit ritual suicide were "the candidates opposing Matayoshi Jesus, the One True God, in the Tokyo 1 District in the House of Representatives election... The same goes for all voters who support them." This may seem harsh, but these more mainstream candidates, who campaigned upon normal issues like the economy and jobs, were contributing towards the belief that "money is everything", said Jesus, who began to bill himself as a "conservative collectivist". Even cheery Smile Party founder Mac Akasaka, as a successful international businessman, needed to have the grin wiped off his face with a taste of cold, hard steel, as worshipping the false god of the economy was the "source of all sin and crime".⁶

Jesus now rejected his early lessons from business school and proved that the very idea of countries having economies at all "brings about war, conflict, terrorism, murder, suicide, industrial accidents, pollution-related disease, poverty and starvation", causing the death of some 50,000 people per day globally. His opponents, therefore, "are the killers of those 50,000 people who die each day", and so must imitate Yukio Mishima. Killing yourself, said Jesus, "represents the very spirit of the Japanese sense

of responsibility", and so ought to be encouraged.⁷

Jesus wished one particular politician would die horribly: Junichiro Koizumi, Japan's PM from 2001 to 2006. The self-described "weirdo" Koizumi is best-known abroad for his flamboyant Richard Gere-like hairstyle and uncontrollable urge to impersonate Elvis Presley; having sung 'Love Me Tender' to George W Bush during a 2006 tour of Graceland, Koizumi also released an album, *Junichiro Koizumi Presents: My Favourite Elvis Songs*, and once helped finance a statue of Presley in Tokyo.

To Matayoshi Jesus, however, Koizumi deserved to go down in history not as The King's biggest fan, but as "the destroyer of all humanity." His decision to subvert Article 9 by sending Japanese peace-keepers into Bush's war in Iraq, combined with his worship of the *gaijin* god Elvis, made Koizumi little more than a Yankee stooge.⁸ In a 2005 *seikenhousou*, or party political broadcast, Jesus laid out the only possible solution: "The [current] leader, Junichiro Koizumi, should resign his leadership post and give it to the only God, Matayoshi Jesus. If he does not... this means that Junichiro Koizumi is a murderer of other people! ... Therefore, Junichiro

**"CERTAIN PEOPLE
MUST SLICE
THEIR BELLIES
OPEN AND DIE"**

Koizumi should slit his stomach open and die... [and then] I, the only God, Matayoshi Jesus, will throw Junichiro Koizumi into the fires blazing in Hell." And as for Koizumi's chum Bush – well, he should commit suicide too, although via the (allegedly) more culturally appropriate method of chopping his own head off in a guillotine.⁹

Matayoshi Jesus became well known for such rants across Japan, but largely as a joke, not a serious political figure. Just as people laughed at Mishima's ritual suicide, which could only ever be viewed as a ridiculous, mass-media entertainment event in a post-war Americanised land, so most could only giggle at Matayoshi Jesus's *seppuku*-related rhetoric.

YANKEE GO HOME!

Jesus's politics were a peculiar combination of heated moral conservatism, profound anti-American sentiment and extreme pacifist nationalism of a sort which only made sense within a specifically Japanese context. His basic idea was to become Japan's PM and kick all *gaijin* out of the country, particularly those with a transatlantic accent. Then, he would transform Japan into a self-sufficient, largely agricultural society based upon national joint-ownership of fishing, farms and forestry, something which would prove so successful that he would be made UN Secretary-General, a role he intended to expand until he became ruler of the world. Then, he would force all foreigners in all lands to return home, and ban any nation's army from venturing abroad, thus exporting Article 9 everywhere. At this point, universal peace would reign, and Christ make good use of the UN's administrative facilities to put in motion the process of the Last Judgement, throwing all sinners and dissenting politicians into a pit of everlasting fire with the efficient assistance of bureaucrats.¹⁰

Such outspoken anti-Americanism does have a certain domestic audience, especially in Matayoshi's birthplace of Okinawa, where there is still a huge US military presence today. Whilst polls show a majority of Japanese are pleased to have the world's strongest military protecting them, many in Okinawa itself feel otherwise; according to a 2010 poll, 71 per cent want the Americans out. Statistics show US troops are less prone towards criminality than the native population, but a number of high-profile rapes have created a false perception that GIs stationed there are a criminal enemy within. Jesus was also unlikely to have been ignorant of the large-scale 'Koza Riot' of 1970, when 5,000 Okinawans rampaged against American interests, burning vehicles, destroying buildings and pummeling soldiers after a drunken GI ran over a local man in his car. To ram home their pro-nationalist message, some rioters provided alternative entertainment during the orgy of violence by performing

PAUL J. RICHARDS / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES



ABOVE: Japanese PM Junichiro Koizumi does his best Elvis impersonation (wearing a pair of the King's actual sunglasses) for Priscilla Presley, Lisa Marie Presley and US President George W Bush during a 2006 tour of Graceland.



ABOVE LEFT: Matayoshi Jesus on the campaign trail, ranting atop his minivan. ABOVE RIGHT: And taking a more conventional approach in a party political television broadcast.

traditional Japanese folk-dances in the street, until tear-gas was deployed to dispel them.

This would seem the likely source of Jesus's schizoid strand of anti-American, pacifist belligerence. As befits a committed nationalist, His website was written in Japanese, but via the magic of online auto-translate it was possible to work out that, while against any revocation of Article 9, he firmly approved of the right of the SDF to defend its own territory instead of babyishly relying upon Washington to do it for them. Writing about the current ownership dispute between Japan and China over the Senkaku Islands, for example, he called for Japan to build a helicopter-base there to assert her sovereignty. Jesus's objection to the "gold first, money is all" outlook of modern Japanese life could be linked back to an innate dislike of American-style free-market capitalism forged during his upbringing in occupied Okinawa.¹¹ Certainly, it was whilst running for Mayor of Okinawa back in 2001 that Jesus gained his best-ever proportional election result of nine per cent of the vote – running outside his traditional anti-US heartland in ultra-rich, globalised Tokyo, he always slipped down to less than one per cent.¹² Matayoshi Jesus probably really did have his own defiant local constituency, therefore, who may have voted for him in an act of genuine anti-American protest rather than purely for fun.

Nonetheless, Jesus chose the wrong country in which to return; he would have stood a better chance of getting elected somewhere other than Japan, where less than one per cent of the population is Christian, the 'traditional' Christmas Day meal is a bucket of (American) KFC, and where the famously polite citizens would probably feel that putting a cross next to

Jesus's name in the polling booth might dredge up bad memories for the poor man¹³ Jesus never did achieve political office, dying on 20 July 2018, aged 74, not from crucifixion this time, but cancer; while he announced pre-death that his website would soon be closing, Matayoshi the Messiah nonetheless reassured all online followers that his "divine name and existence would remain the same".¹⁴ Next month, we shall see whether the reincarnation of a more culturally appropriate *arahitogami*, Gautama Buddha, could outdo Christ on the campaign trail...

NOTES

- 1 Compiled from Ian Buruma, *Inventing Japan: From Empire to Economic Miracle, 1853-1964*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003, especially pp.12-13, 19-21, 42, 66, 116-117; www.chukai.ne.jp/~masago/ningen.html
- 2 www.libraryofsocalscience.com/essays/kimura.html; www.nippon.com/en/column/g00471/the-importance-of-being-mishima%C2%A0yukio.html; www.vox.com/2019/4/30/18100066/japan-shinzo-abe-sdf-emperor-china. When he died, Mishima was preparing a stage-adaptation of Wilde's *Salomé*, which features the beheading of John the Baptist, an event with which he had been obsessed since getting hold of an illustrated edition of the play as a child.
- 3 www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2014/02/05/national/nhk-governors-reveal-rightist-views/#.V42g7NPbDIU; <https://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1755&dat=19931021&id=cLYcAAAAIAJ&sjid=yneEAAAAIAJ&pg=6098,210744&hl=en>; www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/05/japanese-broadcaster-praised-ritual-suicide-rightwinger-nhk-hasegawa
- 4 www.theguardian.com/world/2000/nov/25/books.booksnews; www.theguardian.com/world/2002/aug/21/japan.jonathanwatts; www.theguardian.com/world/2000/may/17/jonathanwatts; <https://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/>

asia-pacific/750180.stm; www.wsns.org/en/articles/2000/06/jap-j13.html

5 www.ourcampaigns.com/CandidateDetail.html?CandidateID=116421

6 We met the cosplaying Mac Akasaka last issue; he wants to save people from suicide via the medium of dance, whereas Matayoshi Jesus encourages people to stab themselves to death, so they are natural enemies.

7 www.durf.org/2009/08/25/matayoshi-jesus-poster/.

8 <https://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/5132376.stm>; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junichir%C5%8D_Koizumi

9 www.youtube.com/watch?v=EA33XFA5bh0; <https://tokyodesu.com/2012/12/08/jesus-superman-and-rock-n-roll-samurai-battle-it-out-for-tokyo-governorship/>. After he left office Koizumi did actually enter a kind of hellish purgatory, making an ill-advised acting appearance as 'Ultraman King' in a risible-sounding Japanese superhero film called *Mega Monster Battle: Ultra Galaxy Legend the Movie*.

10 www.ourcampaigns.com/CandidateDetail.html?CandidateID=116421

11 www.matayoshi.org (offline since Jesus's death)

12 See Jesus's Japanese Wikipedia site and www.ourcampaigns.com/CandidateDetail.html?CandidateID=116421. Less than one per cent may sound poor, but as Tokyo has millions of residents that still equates to as many as 8,382 people voting for Matayoshi in the 20th Upper House elections of 2004, which is pretty good going for a man with no credible policies who drove around in a mini-van shouting that he was Jesus.

13 Although maybe not, seeing as Japan has actually had no fewer than eight Christian PMs during its history.

14 See Jesus's Japanese Wikipedia site.

For further claims that Jesus was Japanese (upon which Matayoshi may have drawn) see **FT110:24-26**.

All you need to know about electric cars...



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Zombies, Vampires, Killer Clowns...

TEA KRULOS wonders whether the Trump presidency is mirrored by the rise of a new sort of political monster

While working on my book *Apocalypse Any Day Now*, I did some research into zombies in pop culture. An interesting study from 2009, referenced in my book, laid out the data that shows we get more vampire-themed movies and entertainment during Democrat administrations, while we get more zombies during Republican ones. The study tallied the number of movies found in both genres dating back to the Eisenhower administration, and the results were consistent overall.

Think of the great 1980s Reagan-era zombie movies like *The Return of the Living Dead* (1985). In 2005 (Bush's second term) there were 158 zombie movies (versus 74 vampire-themed movies). Anne Rice was popular in the Clinton era: the *Interview with a Vampire* movie was a huge hit in 1994. The big hits of the Obama administration were those wretched *Twilight* movies (2008-2012).

Some of the noteworthy films that don't fit the trend make sense if you correlate the source material: both the *World War Z* film and the hit show *The Walking Dead* were released during the Obama administration – but the source material (the 2006 book and 2003 comic series, respectively) was written in the Bush era.

I've read different interpretations of this study. One says the trend reflects the fears of the party in power: Democrats fear vampire-like, parasitic aristocrats, while Republicans fear a zombie revolt of the poor and disenfranchised. The other theory (which I lean towards) is that the films tap into subconscious fears



Like Pennywise, Trump has a wild clownado of orange hair

about the party in power.

The Democrat vampires are suave and sophisticated but deceptive, kinky neck-sucking sex fiends, often times foreigners (Transylvania isn't sending their best), all of which plays into liberalphobia. Conservatives, meanwhile, are viewed as the brainless masses, a hate mob of rotten rednecks shuffling through a Wal-Mart.

Enter a new political animal: President Donald J Trump. He's not a Democrat, but he's not a typical Republican either. As such, I think a new (perhaps one-time only) cycle has displaced the traditional vampire/zombie rotation: the killer clown.¹

"Wait til they get a load of me,"

the Joker says in *Batman* (1989), but the quote could have easily have come from the mouth (or Twitter account) of Trump.

As I've searched for material for the regular #ClownWatch2019 segment on my website's blog, where I record any strange real-life clown sightings, I noticed there have been an awful lot of killer clown movies lately, especially this fall. Over the past couple of years we've had a generous helping of the sub-genre: *American Horror Story: Cult* (2017), which quickly made the Trump/killer clown connection, *It* (2017), *Gags The Clown* (2018), Rob Zombie's clown murder mayhem movie *31* (2018) and too many low budget entries to list.

This September, we saw the return of monster clown Pennywise in *It Chapter 2*, the origin of killer clown *Joker*, and, yes, we've finally arrived here... *Clownado*. That last title pretty much sums up today's politics in one word. There are several other low budget productions trying to catch the crest of

the killer clown wave: *Clownface*, *ClownDoll*, and just plain *Clown* are a few I found on IMDB with 2019 release dates.

These films, like vampire and zombie features, are playing to fears of our times. In this case, it's of a monster that is stupidly reckless and dangerously unpredictable. Like Pennywise, Trump has a wild clownado of orange hair. Note that Pennywise (and imitators) carries a red balloon the same colour as Trump's droopy, clownish tie or a MAGA hat. Trump has a sleeve filled with dirty tricks and his administration is a clown car of chaos. Antics such as buying Greenland for a new secret lair or nuking a hurricane [FT385:14] expose the mind-set of a Joker. When Trump uses a "magic" marker to defiantly insist that Alabama is in a hurricane zone when it isn't, he hopes he can change reality, like a cartoonish clown drawing a door on a wall and then stepping through it to make a quick getaway.

Trump's unhinged decision-making about who to fire, who to threaten, and what diplomatic ties to sever are not of a politician or a businessman, but of a killer clown dancing and stabbing people in a haunted house.

It's easy to laugh at his childish behaviour, ranting and stomping his feet about everything from inauguration crowd sizes to hurricane zones, but then comes the terror as we realise this might all be part of an unfolding horror story. Welcome to the clownpocalypse of our times!

¹ Curiously, the sinister clown wave of 2016 trailed off dramatically after Trump's election in November, which was announced in a Mexican newspaper under a "killer clown" headline. See FT347:28-35, 348:20-21.

TEA KRULOS is the author of *Apocalypse Any Day Now: Deep Underground with America's Doomsday Preppers*. You can find him at teakrulos.com.

A grin without a cat

ROB GANDY offers up a long-cherished theory about the origin of a familiar phrase

One of the most popular characters in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is the Cheshire Cat, who acts as Alice's companion. He has a habit of suddenly disappearing and so Alice asks if he could disappear more slowly. The cat does as he is asked, disappearing bit by bit until all that is left is his smile, causing Alice to say "I've seen a cat without a grin, but never a grin without a cat!"

The origins of the phrase 'to grin like a Cheshire Cat' have often been queried, particularly as the saying was not, and never had been, a very common one in the County of Cheshire,¹ and there is no actual feline breed of this name. Lewis Carroll, aka Reverend Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, certainly did not create the phrase; it had been cited many times before *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* was published in 1865. Possibly its first appearance in literature was in *A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, compiled by Francis Grose (1788), where the phrase is attributed to "someone who reveals his/her teeth and gums wide open while laughing."² It is mentioned in *The Works of Peter Pindar*, by John Walcot, the poet and satirist, where it is stated: "Lo! like a Cheshire cat our court will grin" (c. 1794/1801). Also, William Makepeace Thackeray in *The Newcomes; memoirs of a most respectable family* (1855) has Mr Newcome say to Mr Pendennis, "That woman grins like a Cheshire cat"; which is then followed by the apparently sarcastic question, "Who was the naturalist who first discovered that peculiarity of the cats in



On the chancel's east wall was a carving of a cat's head

Cheshire?"

There have been several theories as to the origins of the phrase, and these have been discussed on the Internet,³ including by *FT*'s own Karl Shuker.⁴ They can be summarised as follows:

BRITISH BLUE CATS

A breed of cat known for a 'smiling' expression, because of its broad cheeks and upturned mouth. There is conjecture that they moved to Cheshire over time with their people. However, this British Shorthair breed is pretty ubiquitous, and it would be surprising if it was ever closely associated with the county.

CHEESE

Cheshire cheeses were once moulded in the shape of a grinning cat. The county is famous for its dairy production and cheese. As Carroll grew up

in the village of Daresbury in Cheshire, he would be familiar with the local practice of producing cheeses in the shape of a grinning cat. Apparently, a John Cathedral of Chester, whose coat of arms from 1304 included a cat, always bared his teeth in a grin when angry; he was killed in defence of the city, and literally died with a smile on his face. It was in his honour that Cheshire cheese-makers traditionally moulded their cheeses into the shape of cats with a wide grin on their faces.

HERALDRY

The first Earl of Chester's coat of arms was inscribed with the Lions of England, animals common in heraldic designs. Mediaeval artists would never have seen a lion but were required to depict them as snarling, with the result that their efforts resembled grinning cats.

PUB SIGNS

The same argument is made for sign painters when they painted lions on inn signboards in the county.

CARVINGS

There are several church carvings of lions/cats that are deemed

LEFT: Tenniel's famous illustration of the Cheshire cat from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. FACING PAGE BOTTOM: The grinning, cat-like face in St Nicholas's church, Cranleigh. FACING PAGE TOP: What happens when you superimpose a grinning mouth on a map of Cheshire.

potential candidates for inspiring Carroll, including at the 13th century St Christopher's in Pott Shrigley, Cheshire, where the crest of the local Pott family was a wild cat. There is a stone effigy of a cat in Brimstage Hall, on the Wirral, where the Domville family, who lived there during the early 1300s, had a coat-of-arms of a red lion rampant. And a carving of a grinning cat peeks out from above the main entrance to St Wilfrid's in Grappenhall, Cheshire, where Carroll's father, a vicar, used to preach.

Interestingly, when Joel Birenbaum (of The Lewis Carroll Society of North America) visited St Peter's Church, in Croft-on-Tees, North Yorkshire, where Carroll's father was rector, he noticed on the chancel's east wall a stone carving of a cat's head, which appeared to be floating in the air a few feet above the floor. When he got on his knees for closer inspection and looked up, the image of the cat was rendered invisible – except, that is, for its carved smile, stretching virtually from ear to ear, which lingered in precisely the manner of Carroll's Cheshire Cat! It is considered that much of *Alice* was set in and around the church and rectory at Croft, but even if Carroll *were* inspired by the optical illusion of the St Peter's figure, this does not answer the question of why he referred to a *Cheshire* Cat, or why Cheshire cats are supposed to grin.

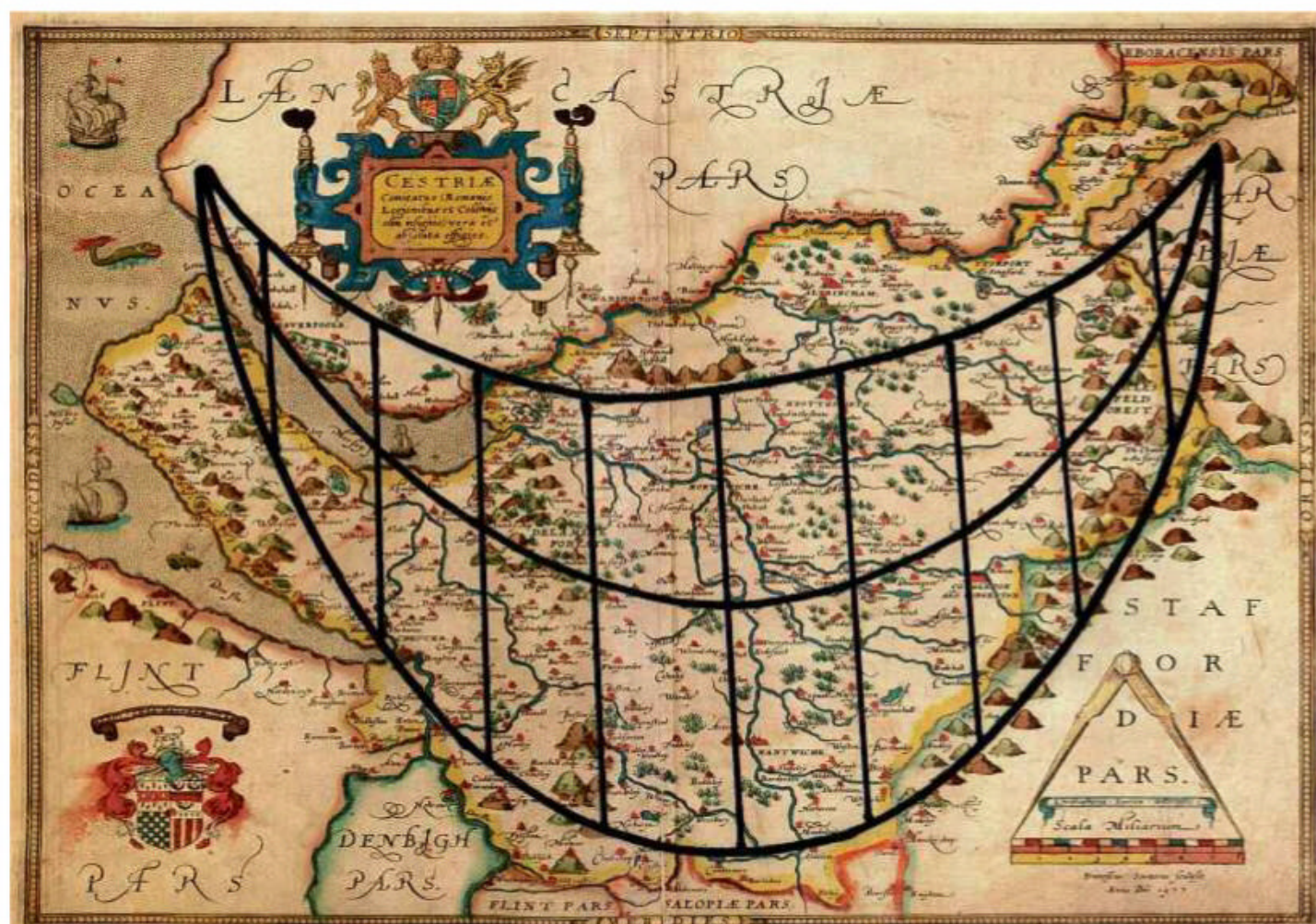
There are other speculations, which may or may not be fairly tenuous, such as: a cat-like gargoyle on a pillar in St Nicholas's church, Cranleigh,



near Guildford, where Carroll lived at one point; a jester named Cat Kaitlin, a Cheshire native, who had a wide smile; a peg-board game; folk memories of the former existence in Cheshire of an ancient cat-venerating tribe called the Khatti; a parable bespeaking the limits of mathematics; the abundance of milk and cream in Cheshire, meaning all local cats were happy, possibly because this enticed rats and mice from ships moored in the docks when Chester was a port; or the wandering Moon, which slowly turns into a fingernail crescent, resembling a grin, before it finally disappears.

Which of these is correct? Well, perhaps none of them – because I would like to offer my own theory, which I have held since my early days (which as I am no spring chicken is a *long* time ago). When looking into this question I was very surprised to find that my personal theory was nowhere to be found, because I was sure that someone else would have had thoughts along similar lines over the years. And my theory is simple: it is that the ‘smile’ actually refers to the shape of the county of Cheshire itself.

Of course, I am referring to the traditional county of Cheshire, which existed before the reorganisation of local authorities that took place in 1974⁵ and would have been what everyone referred to in the 18th and 19th centuries. If you look at a map of Cheshire, you will see that it has its eastern and western extremities ‘curling upwards’, with Hyde, Stalybridge and Woodhead in the East and the Wirral peninsula in the West. The wide, central part of the ‘smile’ is then from Stockton Heath in the north to Audlem in the south. The northern boundary of the county was the River Mersey, and following the northern bank, or even the centre of the river, creates a straighter ‘upper lip’ than if looking at the southern bank, because of where the river significantly widens north of Ince. The picture at top right shows a smile that broadly matches the traditional county



boundaries superimposed on a map of Cheshire. Admittedly, the county boundary makes for the smile of someone that has just had a punch in the mouth, but I speculate that people in the 17th and 18th centuries were likely to have made the same connection as I did in my youth. I then see a saying that someone ‘has a smile like Cheshire’ quickly evolving into that person having a ‘grin like a Cheshire Cat’, because people like to personify sayings and attach them to creatures. And the creature most likely to

be used would be the cat, given that this animal is used in very many idiomatic phrases.⁶ One of these is ‘looks like the cat that got the cream’, which means someone who looks very satisfied or pleased with themselves because they have been successful or done something they are proud of, which links cats with smiles in the popular imagination.⁷ ‘Cheshire Cat’ also has an alliterative element, which would not be the case with other commonplace contemporary animals, such as dogs.

It is unlikely that there will ever be a definitive answer to the question, and no doubt people will disagree with my theory. But my response is to refer to occam’s razor: the outline shape of the traditional county of Cheshire simply *does* look like a smile/grin/grimace. I rest my case.

NOTES

- ¹ <https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/225170/why-does-a-cheshire-cat-grin-and-how-long-has-it-been-doing-so>
- ² www.catster.com/lifestyle/cheshire-cat-lewis-carroll
- ³ www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/grinning-like-a-cheshire-cat.html; www.purr-n-fur.org.uk/fabled/cheshirecat.html; www.quora.com/What-is-the-origin-of-the-Cheshire-Cat
- ⁴ <https://karlshuker.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/smile-on-face-of-cheshire-cat.html?m=1>
- ⁵ www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1972/70/contents
- ⁶ <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/cat>
- ⁷ I tried to track down the origin of this phrase but cannot find one. It is almost certain that it has a long history and predates ‘To grin like a Cheshire Cat’

◆ **ROB GANDY** is a visiting professor at the Liverpool Business School, John Moores University, and a regular contributor to FT.

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Stranger than we can imagine...

Few astrobiologists will be surprised if there are life forms – however unlike those on Earth – elsewhere in the Universe, according to an introduction that forteans and all ufologists should read

Astrobiology

The Search for Life Elsewhere in the Universe

Andrew May

Icon Books 2019

Pb, 168pp, illus, ind, £8.99 ISBN 9781785783425

Controversy swirled around NASA's announcement in August 1996 that they'd discovered possible signs of life in the Martian meteorite ALH84001 (see Kathy Sawyer's fascinating *The Rock From Mars*). As Andrew May points out in his informative and engaging introduction to astrobiology, NASA's argument rests on "a whole string of suggestive facts" in a now famous paper (*Science* 1996:273:924–930). Opponents marshalled evidence that geological factors and contamination from Earth could account for the individual findings. May notes that researchers need to rule out other causes and suggests that until there is further evidence, Martian bacteria are less likely than non-biological causes and terrestrial contamination to account for the changes in the meteorite that NASA linked to possible signs of life.

But 23 years later, the debate rumbles on. A paper published, I suspect, too recently to include in May's book, reported that another Martian meteorite (ALH-77005) found in the same area (Allan Hills) in Antarctica in 1977 shows features that, the researchers suggest, indicate the "presence of microbial mediation on Mars". The results "fit well" with NASA's 1996 interpretation (*Open Astronomy* 2019;28:32–39). Certainly, researchers need to rule out non-biological causes and terrestrial contamination. But it seems it's too soon to write off the Martian microbes hitching a lift to Earth on meteorites.

Indeed, few astrobiologists will be that surprised if there's life – microbes at least – on Mars or another Solar System body, let alone on planets around another star. After all, studies on the International Space Station suggest that several micro-organisms – including bacteria, lichen, algæ and fungi – remain active in an environment similar to that on Mars (*Astrobiology* 2019;19:145–157).

I've not given up hope of Martian animals. Tardigrades (familiar to fans of *Star Trek Discovery*) are less than a millimetre long and live on the surfaces of mosses and lichens. If their habitat dries, tardigrades effectively enter suspended animation. Exposure to the vacuum of space had little impact on the tardigrades' survival and ability to reproduce once rehydrated. They also tolerate high levels of radiation (*Current Biology* 2008;18:R729-R731). In April, a crash of an Israeli probe might have distributed dehydrated tardigrades on the Moon, where they may remain in suspended animation [FT385:9]. A 'Martian tardigrade' feeding on lichen and algæ, leeward from the harsh environment protected by rocks, may be unlikely, but probably isn't outside the bounds of biological possibility.

May's explanations are concise, clear and yet capture the sense of wonder that drives many people's fascination with astrobiology. He covers a wide range of topics, many of which will be familiar to forteans, such as the discovery of the WOW! signal, for which, he notes, there is still no "convincing natural explanation", 'Oumuamua – the first confirmed interstellar visitor to our Solar System, which prompted serious suggestions

"Broadly humanoid life could evolve on a planet with seas of water similar to those on Earth"

that the cigar-shaped object might be part of an alien spacecraft [FT385:8] – and fast radio bursts (FRBs), which release huge amounts of energy in milliseconds, the origin of which remains unknown.

May notes that Harvard researchers suggested FRBs may be the "signatures of advanced interstellar spaceships". The beam is tightly focused on Earth for only a time as the craft manoeuvres. Mathematical modelling of the energy needed to propel a spacecraft using a light sail, May comments, is "a good match to the observed properties of FRBs". (Light sails work – as a satellite currently orbiting the Earth shows: www.planetary.org/explore/projects/light-sail-solar-sailing.) The most important word in the last paragraph is, of course, 'may': but it's at least a possibility.

May scatters science fiction references throughout the book. So, when discussing why silicon-based life is unlikely, May references *Star Trek's* rock-burrowing Horta and Stanley Weinbaum's *A Martian Odyssey*. But whether aliens be humanoid – or life but not as we know it – is a long-standing argument.

Advocates of evolutionary convergence suggest, put rather simplistically, that organisms facing similar environmental challenges will evolve similar

biochemistry, anatomy and physiology. So fish, ichthyosaurs and dolphins have very different evolutionary origins. But challenges of maritime life resulted in broadly similar body plans. So, if life evolves on one of *Star Trek's* class M planets – with gravity, atmosphere, seas of water and diurnal rhythms that are very similar to those on Earth – convergence suggests that broadly humanoid life could evolve. Any differences may be skin-deep.

May supports the "life not as we know it" argument. He proposes that because aliens evolved on a "completely different planet" in terms of, for example, "surface gravity, atmospheric composition, length of day... No amount of convergent evolution is going to result in anything that looks remotely like ourselves".

Certainly, a completely different planet will pose environmental challenges that are completely different to those on Earth and so life will evolve in completely different ways. But if I have one criticism, it's that I feel May doesn't give sufficient space to the convergence arguments proposed by academics such as the evolutionary biologist Simon Conway Morris (see *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A* 2011;369:555–571, for example). That quibble doesn't, however, detract from May's overall accomplishment.

Even a "completely different planet" doesn't rule out life. Microbes, for example, can survive remarkably high gravity. The bacteria *Escherichia coli* and *Paracoccus denitrificans* can



Continued overleaf

Magickal Mystery Tour

A lovingly crafted fold-out guide to the esoteric places and faces of the capital



Occult London

A Guide to the Highly Unusual

Kate Hodges, Tree Carr, Brian Rau

Herb Lester Associates (<http://herblester.com>), 2019
£12, ISBN 9781999343934

Herb Lester Associates's maps and city guides have always been relatively eclectic in their subject matter. *FT* recently reviewed their map of North American cults (FT383:64). These elegant fold-out objects have mainly focused on European cities such as Paris, Lisbon, Hamburg, Venice, and Helsinki; but London has been at the centre of their project, and so we've seen guides to Brutalist London, Filthy London, Wild London, Punk London and now a map seemingly tailored especially for the *FT* reader: *Occult London*.

Quirkily illustrated by Brian Rau, this guide covers occult landmarks (past and present)

around the capital, including separate panels focusing on 'Hawksmoor's London' and 'Notable Figures of the Occult'.

In the central London section, I happily note the inclusion of our favourite London bookseller, Museum Street's Atlantis Bookshop. Further on, 29 Frith Street gets a mention as the home of the Moka Bar, where in 1972 William Burroughs launched a

sound-and-image psychic attack which, he claimed, saw the place closing down three months later. Other locations include the homes of Arthur Machen, Gerald Gardner and Dennis Wheatley.

South London features Austin Osman Spare's home and Brixton's Powerfulhand.com shop, with its blend of Catholic, Native American and Vodou products, while north London includes Avenue Road, home of Annie Besant, where Madame Blavatsky spent many years, Highgate Cemetery, and Dion Fortune's Society of the Inner Light. Gerald Gardner and Aleister Crowley crop up on a regular basis, weaving an occult thread through the life of the city.

This lovingly crafted guide makes a beautiful poster for that empty wall and a perfect present for any occultists on your Christmas list.

Etienne Gilfillan
★★★★★

Continued from previous page

proliferate even at 403,627 times the force of gravity (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 2011;108:7997–8002). May mentions other extremophiles, such organisms that live under crushingly high pressure, in water at hundreds of degrees Celsius and even inside nuclear reactors. Extremophiles raise the prospect that life – of some kind – is likely across the cosmos.

May's new book is an eloquent, well researched and thought-provoking introduction to a fascinating area that is especially worth reading if you've not really taken an interest in astrobiology before. You'll understand what the fuss is about when, for example, astronomers get excited about Martian transient methane plumes or clay-like rocks suggesting water once flowed on Mars. But May's book should be on the shelf of every forteran, every ufologist (whatever your favoured theory) and everyone with even a passing interest in the sky at night.

Mark Greener
★★★★★

Fairies

A Dangerous History

Richard Sugg

Reaktion Books 2019
Pb, 279pp, illus, bib, ind, £9.99, ISBN 9781789141207

Do you believe in fairies? Many of us would say no, then perhaps sigh and say, "But I wish..."

Richard Sugg's book provides dozens of stories of people encountering fairies, or at least accepting their existence as a given. A good number of the accounts are from Ireland, but others are from Cornwall, Wales and Scotland; many are from the 18th and 19th centuries, but a few are from the 20th.

"Once, people really believed in fairies," Sugg writes. "By the close of Chapter Three you should be able to see why, and you should [...] then find that fairies never look the same to you again." And that's because fairies, in folk memory and folklore, aren't little gossamer-winged creatures dancing prettily in a meadow. The subtitle of this book is 'A dangerous history'. Fairies may, on occasion, decide to be helpful to humans, but

they have their own agenda. If you cross them, you can be sure they'll let you know; there are numerous stories here of someone starting to build a house across a fairy path, only to have the foundations collapse over and over again.

(I can add my own account. There's no-one more down-to-earth and practical than a farmer. The dairy farmers I knew, growing up in the Lake District, would put a bowl of milk in their barns at night, not for the farm cats, they said, but to keep the Little People happy so they wouldn't turn the cows' milk sour.)

Some stories are positive: people seeing or hearing fairies dancing, sometimes describing them in some detail. But others deal with changelings – or rather, with the sometimes dreadful result of the belief in changelings: a baby put out to die, because the parents have become convinced it's not their own child; an awful story of a young woman beaten to death by her husband because someone has told him she's a fairy substitute.

What are fairies? Where do they come from? One interesting belief is that "the less guilty of the fallen angels had been cast into earth, air and water as nymphs, fairies, goblins, satyrs and fauns". Alternatively, these "angel fairies" were divided into fairies on land, mermaids or seals (silkies) in the sea and the Northern Lights in the air.

Or they could be the spirits of the dead. Whatever their origins, Sugg says, "the popular mind had effectively substituted the fairy world for both heaven and hell".

Every now and then Sugg has a dig at Christianity, from stating a couple of times that there is more evidence for fairies than for God or Christianity, to relating the story of St Odran being buried alive in the foundations of St Columba's Church as "a written history later suppressed by the Church". No, it's a pious legend, on a par with thousands of other such legends, and certainly not history.

The first half of the book is divided loosely into the appearance of fairies, their locations, meeting with them, and their danger. It's all secondary research, plundering





Katharine Briggs, Evans-Wentz and others; it's basically the folklore of fairies, though Sugg uses the term 'folklore' rather dismissively throughout. One of the most important sources of fairy lore, the Rev Robert Kirk's *Secret Commonwealth of Elves and Fairies* (c.1690), isn't mentioned till over 100 pages in, and only merits two pages of comment.

The second half changes gear abruptly, looking at fairies in literature and art: Shakespeare, Keats, Peter Pan, Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market', the paintings of Richard Dadd and others. The author was an English lecturer at Durham University, and here he's clearly comfortable in his analysis. Moving into the 20th century there's the famous hoax of the Cottingley fairy photos, championed by, among others, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle – and more recently, leprechauns were seen by groups of boys in Liverpool in 1964.

It's clear throughout the book that, like Mulder, Sugg wants to believe; sometimes his descriptions of fairy encounters are almost gushing. There are lots of great stories here. But annoyingly, Sugg tells all these tales of people's encounters with fairies, wondrous or horrific, with no citations. There are about three pages of Sources and Further Reading, listing books, articles, dissertations and websites, but no way of tracking down or following up any individual account. Similarly, the three-page index, nearly all single-level, is so slight it's almost useless. Considering that the author is (or at least was) an academic, this is appalling, rendering his book no more than an entertaining read.

David V Barrett

★★★★★

The Shape of the Soul

What Mystical Experience Tells Us About Ourselves and Reality

Paul Marshall

Rowman & Littlefield 2019

Hb, 426pp, illus, notes, bib, ind, £19.95, ISBN 9781538124772

Paul Marshall's *The Shape of the Soul* is fundamentally a quest narrative. It takes in the author's

own experiential dealings with altered states of awareness; surveys the canon of mystical literature, both East and West, which addresses the thorny issues of metaphysics; and, bravely, suggests how the 'new physics', biological evolutionism and Leibniz's 'monadology' may constitute a new theory of idealism.

Central to his thesis are the mystical experience he underwent as an undergraduate in the 1980s and his memories of what he believed were significant dream encounters. Upon waking one morning he began to remember a vision of cosmic proportions. Swept across the sea into an alien realm, he witnessed a universe of light in which mutable shapes and shadows, an absence of pain and an awareness of other beings as circles of



light flooded his senses.

He believes this encounter with cosmic consciousness – wholeness – led him onto a radical ontological journey. *Shape of the Soul* is his

attempt to come to terms with his experience and forge a new understanding of how we may embrace such profound mystical insights.

Each chapter deals with a specific aspect of his journey, and Marshall supports his ideas with detailed critical accounts of philosophers and mystics who tackle such perennial philosophical issues as non-dualism, mind and matter, consciousness and post-mortem survival. Heavy stuff, and though Marshall's style may not be for everybody, it steers a clear path.

It is Marshall's championing of Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) and his 'Monadology' – a philosophical approach that countered dualism by an acceptance of a multiplicity of singular points of view throughout nature, yet unified through their being 'perceptual living mirrors of the universe' – that frames his own personal experience, and suggests a new paradigm of mystical comprehension.

Referencing his vision of sentient circles of light, Marshall discusses the fantastic realm of 'soul spheres'. Beginning with an account of Dr Duncan MacDougall's attempts to weigh the soul in 1905, visions of the soul, and encounters

with extraterrestrial spherical entities, citing Baptista van Helmont (1580–1644) and more recently, Jeffrey Kripal (b.1962), among others, Marshall's mystical accountancy is second to none. We are guided through such diverse realms as hypnagogic and entoptic phenomena, Jungian archetypes, subtle anatomies and omnivision by Marshall's forensic approach to his own experiences. Not content with presenting an archaeology of cosmic consciousness, Marshall proposes a revised transcendental idealism that incorporates Leibniz's monadology into the radical discourses that underpin modern physics and cosmology and evolutionary biology. By considering the ideas of wholeness and interconnectivity that are fundamental to mathematics, quantum theory and relativity, as espoused for example by Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) and David Bohm (1917–1992), such concepts as non-locality, enfoldment and implicate order take on a distinctly metaphysical hue.

Not to be outdone by the mysteries of the microscopic world, such radical cosmologists as Bernard Carr (b.1949), whose speculation as to the existence of 'hyper-cosmic' dimensions that generate universal spaces known as the 'Bulk' and the 'Brane', worlds within worlds, are drawn into Marshall's re-inscription of Leibniz's 'Great Chain of Being'. Mind-bending material to say the least, but Marshall's project is not purely theoretical. Finding solace in an infinite chain of unfolding knowledge and accompanied by his own act of remembering – his vision of universal presence and love – Marshall argues that by questioning anthropocentrism we can renew our re-enchantment with each other and the Universe. Whether, as he suggests, consciousness remains a part of this continuum is open to debate, but his theorising remains resolutely human, no less. If, as he maintains, and as Leibniz maintained before him, that we occupy the best of all possible worlds, then his message is one of positive engagement with our 'divine souls'.



Shape of the Soul requires a familiarity with Western and Eastern philosophical traditions and may not be for the general reader. The text is replete with detailed analysis of the rich tradition of non-dualistic thinking and idealism and supported with detailed notes, a comprehensive bibliography and an index.

An important contribution to a neglected and unfashionable area of human experience in our increasingly digital world.

Chris Hill

★★★★★

The Secret History of the Hell-Fire Clubs

From Rabelais and John Dee to Anton LaVey and Timothy Leary

Geoffrey Ashe

Bear & Co 2019

Pb, bib, ind, £15.45, ISBN 9781591433484

This book started life as *Do What You Will: A History of Anti-moralism* (1974) before ending up, in this fourth

edition, with this moniker.

It might have suited its original title (reviewed in FT139:56) better, as some of the material (Edmund Curll's porn and scandal

publishing, for instance) strains for relevance. Geoffrey Ashe, in his introduction, justifies leaving jarring phraseology as a product of its time, though the final pages are "necessarily somewhat remodelled", so why not dump the outdated views on women too? Unfortunately, howlers such as the incorrect title of Richardson's novel *Clarissa* were not picked up.

This aside, there is much to interest. Ashe traces 'Do what you will' from Rabelais's *Gargantua*, the tale of a giant who drowned thousands of Parisiens by pissing on them, among other japes. It introduced the Utopian (or feudal) 'abbey' of Thelema, whose only rule was "fay ce que voudras". Rabelais thought that people would choose good if they were given liberty... and had been selected from the beautiful and rich. Anti-moralism, it transpires, was not egalitarian.

William Darragh

★★★★★

The Moon goddess shines

The late Steve Moore – *Fortean Times*’s much loved and missed friend and polymath – concludes that Selene is fundamentally unknowable

Selene

The Moon Goddess and the Cave Oracle

Steve Moore

Strange Attractor Press 2019

Hb, 256pp, indp, bib, £25.00, ISBN 9781907222504

Steve Moore was a man of many accomplishments. He indexed the first 100 or so issues of *Fortean Times*, edited several reprint volumes and anthologies, and later its sister journal *Fortean Studies*. In 1971, he created the first UK fanzine *Orpheus*. He wrote several of the most memorable serials for *2000 AD*, including ‘Hollow World’, many of the long-running *Future Shocks*, and the more recent ‘Red Fang’. He wrote for *Doctor Who Weekly* and other Marvel UK titles, and contributed to the now legendary anthology series *Warrior*. He also wrote stories for Tom Strong’s *Terrific Tales*, one of frequent collaborator Alan Moore’s line of America’s Best Comics. At the time of his death, he and Moore were co-writing *The Moon and Serpent Bumper Book of Magic*, a modern-day grimoire. Steve Moore was a noted authority on the I Ching. His *I Ching: An Annotated Bibliography* (2002) is a now-classic text on the subject. He was inducted into the Royal Asiatic Society as a Fellow, and from 1995–2002 edited *The Oracle, The Journal of Yijing Studies*. He also wrote fiction, notably *Tales of Telguuth* and the novel *Somnium: A Fantastic Romance* (2011), both published by Strange Attractor Press.

Somnium takes place in The Bull Inn at the summit of Shooter’s Hill in south-east London, where Moore lived a near-hermetic existence in his childhood home. The novel, which concerns a young man’s attempt to write a romance based on the relationship between the Moon Goddess Selene and the mortal Endymion, was in part



autobiographical, as Moore spent decades researching the history, mythology and literary and representational depictions of Selene. His researches began in October 1976 when, after an improvised magic ritual for guidance, conducted with a recently-purchased Chinese coin sword – Moore was an admirer of Chinese swordfight films – he

awoke near dawn to hear a voice speak the name ‘Endymion.’ Thus, Moore, who was born during a full moon, had a crescent-shaped birthmark, and lived atop a crescent-shaped hill composed primarily of the mineral selenite, came to identify himself with the sleeper Endymion, Selene’s forsaken lover. Lunar references began to appear in his comics and fiction. In his biography of Steve Moore, Alan Moore describes witnessing a later event wherein Steve conjured the physical form of Selene. Steve’s biographical details are recounted in Bob Rickard’s introduction to *Selene* and Alan Moore’s afterword, and in Alan’s earlier *Unearthing*, a short biography of Steve, first published in Iain Sinclair’s anthology, *London: City of Disappearances* (2009).

The extra-textual details about Steve’s unearthly, occult relationship with Selene are absent from this text, so it is difficult to parse from this densely conveyed yet orderly and cohesive work of scholarship the passion that led to this project. He probably assumed that such occult circumstances would be a difficult sell for more serious scholars. Perhaps *Somnium* already covered this territory, or perhaps Moore, who expressed reservations about the attention given to his private life in the wake of Alan Moore’s autobiography, wanted the focus of attention to be on Selene. What Moore is most concerned with in *Selene* is the origin and development of the Moon Goddess in myth, literature and

iconography. His mastery of the material is evident: one does not feel the weight of the research as one normally does in more pedantic compilations.

Nevertheless, Selene remains a rather unfixed figure; the myths and legends that sprang up about her comprise many variations. At times she seems to consist of a multiplicity of identities, with no definable set of characteristics or attributes, not even a consistent name. Rather, the Moon Goddess represents a syncretic cluster of correspondences, mythological resonances whose attainment of a distinctive identity depends on cultural and historical circumstances. Thus, Moore is troubled to confidently determine just who Selene is, apart from a variety of interpretations and representations. Historical research demands hard, solid evidence, insightfully and incisively – which is to say “professionally” – interpreted. Yet what Moore has bravely and somewhat poetically concluded in light of his studies (he gives the fanciful Robert Graves a well-earned knocking), is that Selene, just as she physically appeared to Moore at his home on Shooter’s Hill, must finally remain a vague, indeterminate spirit. Moore’s Selene is not entirely present or entirely absent.

Strange Attractor Press is to be commended for publishing *Selene*. It deserves attention if only to celebrate Moore’s obsessive pursuit of a subject and an acknowledgment that, no matter what the vintage of the materials at hand, there remains fresh evidence to be unearthed, tidbits of buried information that, once the dirt and dust has been wiped away, captures the imagination with the radiance of a jewel made brilliant by pressure, time, heat and darkness.

Eric Hoffman
★★★★★

Darkness

A Cultural History

Nina Edwards

Reaktion Books 2018

Hb, 288pp, illus, plates, refs, bib, ind, £25.00, ISBN 9781780239828

When I was an art/design student, two Rembrandt paintings disturbed me. One shows a philosopher brooding in his study. While the small central scene is saturated with golden sunlight, it is literally overshadowed by the stairs looming behind him. They ascend, like Jacob’s Ladder, drawing the eye into an impenetrable gloom. The glowing library seemed to represent what we know, but the dark at the top of the stairs promised more, if you had the courage to face the unknown. The other painting is his self-portrait from 1629. Against a dim background, the upper part of the young man’s head becomes a silhouette, his features obscured by pools of darkness that have welled out of his eyes. It could be a portrait of depression; equally, it could be symbolic of his unknown future.

Darkness – which seems to have few tangible characteristics of its own – is nevertheless very rich in analogies, from Plato’s cave-model of reality onwards. Nina Edwards’s cultural history shows that far from representing emptiness, darkness is – like the Daoists’ Uncarved Block – pregnant with possibilities.

She explores what this has meant for the world’s cultures, especially for the arts concerned with imagery and imagination. Of course, it is darkness, when contrasted with light, that compounds meaningfulness. Our progression from observing natural forms and passages of light and dark to the discoveries of fire, chemistry, electricity, photography and so on have had profound effects on culture and society. Edwards writes clearly and engagingly as she explores the mythological and psychological interpretations as well as the scientific and technological imperatives in keeping darkness at bay. This is a very worthy effort to illuminate an ever-present but seldom considered ingredient of our lives and experiences.

Bob Rickard
★★★★★



The SF and fantasy round-up

David V Barrett on Pullman's latest, corruption among the rejuvenated Charmers, Sherlock's Christmas bogeyman, some rather unpredictable human behaviour and a *very* graphic novel...

The Secret Commonwealth

Philip Pullman

Penguin 2019

Hb, 687pp, £20.00, ISBN 9780241373330

Snakeskins

Tim Major

Titan Books 2019

Pb, 399pp, £8.99, ISBN 9781789090789

Sherlock Holmes & the Christmas Demon

James Lovegrove

Titan Books 2019

Hb, 372pp, £12.99, ISBN 9781785658020

Zed

Joanna Kavenna

Faber & Faber 2019

Hb, 367pp, £16.99, ISBN 9780571245154

Maria M

Gilbert Hernandez

Fantagraphics Books 2019

Hb, 232pp, \$29.99, ISBN 9781683960164

At last it's here! In *The Secret Commonwealth* Philip Pullman ramps up the intricacy and complexity – and emotional pain – of his *Book of Dust*, after the fairly simple adventure of a boy rescuing a baby in his canoe in part one, *La Belle Sauvage*. Lyra, now aged around 20, is a student at Oxford. Malcolm, her rescuer, is a scholar there, and deeply involved in Oakley Street, the secret society which works quietly behind the scenes to counter the increasing threat of aspects of the Magisterium.

We're launched straight into the complex plot with Lyra's daemon Pantalaimon observing the brutal murder of a botanist who was investigating the mystical healing power of rare eastern roses, with the machinations of

an arch-manipulator at the heart of the Church – and with the new Master of Jordan College in Oxford, which has protected Lyra since her infancy, now making her feel very unwelcome there.

Lyra and Pantalaimon have fallen out, badly, and most of the fault is Lyra's. She's been sucked into the influence of two philosophers who put logical, sceptical, harsh rationalism before everything else; Lyra has become hardened by their ideas. The secret commonwealth of the title is precisely what Lyra has lost: "the world of hidden things and hidden relationships", the world of fairies and ghosts and witches – and dæmons.

In despair, Pan leaves her, to try to find her lost imagination. Separately they set out for Central Asia in search of answers, with Malcolm following close behind. But Lyra has powerful enemies (including some very interesting connections from both *La Belle Sauvage* and the earlier *His Dark Materials* trilogy) and they too are on her track.

This is a novel of non-stop adventure, with danger at every step, especially as Lyra is travelling without her dæmon, arousing fear and suspicion amongst almost everyone she encounters; at one point she is seriously assaulted by four drunken soldiers. It's powerful, it's often harsh; it's certainly not a kids' book.

It's a great read. But it has a problem: it's not a finished standalone novel. After 687 pages there's a very unsatisfactory non-ending; the story is left unresolved with an annoying "To be concluded...", making this book the first half of a novel that's been almost arbitrarily chopped in two. This is increasingly common in SF/fantasy trilogies, and it's indicative of lazy story structuring: not a charge I ever thought I would make against Philip Pullman.

It means that when the remainder of this novel (part three of the trilogy) eventually appears in a year or so, you'll have to reread this one

first, or you'll lose many of the plot complications. It's annoying and unnecessary – so wait till the final volume appears before reading this one. It'll save you a lot of irritation.

After a meteor appeared a century ago, a small group of people known as Charmers are rejuvenated every seven years, in the process casting off a shortlived clone known as a "snakeskin". But when teenager Caitlin Hext has her first shedding ceremony, her snakeskin doesn't fall to dust as she'd expected; instead it (or she) is taken away by a government official. In three story strands in Tim Major's fascinating *Snakeskins*, Caitlin, a journalist and a personal assistant to a politician in the ruling Great British Prosperity Party (most of whose MPs are long-lived Charmers) gradually discover a web of deception and corruption at the highest level. Secrets are revealed and the action ramps up to the very end. An excellent and innovative novel.

James Lovegrove has cornered the market in Sherlock Holmes novels over the last few years. His latest, *Sherlock Holmes & the Christmas Demon*, has the sleuth (helped or hindered by his faithful scribe) ensuring that a young lady doesn't lose her inheritance by being declared mad, when she has seen evidence of the sinister Black Thurrick, a supernatural Christmas bogeyman, around her family mansion. The story is full of the usual delightful Holmesian observations, with plot complications, diversions and red herrings aplenty, amidst spooky occurrences, naughty upstairs and downstairs behaviour, jewel thefts and a murder. A light but fun seasonal gift.

Imagine that your phone or wristwatch notes your every heartbeat, your every change of mood; your fridge checks what you're eating and tells you to have breakfast; and everywhere you go you're observed – and that all this data is

constantly uploaded to automated systems. In Joanna Kavena's deeply dystopian *Zed*, the Beetle corporation is omnipresent, monitoring everybody, all the time. By analysing people's past behaviour, predictive "lifechains" can tell if they're about to commit a crime, and stop them. But when an Anti-Terror Droid shoots the wrong person dead, the system can't possibly be wrong; people themselves must have been behaving unpredictably – an increasingly common phenomenon that becomes known as Zed. An interesting story, let down by a dull, dry writing style, making it feel more like an essay than a novel.

Maria M can be read on several levels. Most simply, it's a graphic novel telling the crime noir story of a woman who moves from Latin America to the USA in the 1950s; heavy-breasted, she's caught up in adult movies before marrying a much older drug baron. Be prepared for a lot of *very* graphic sex and violence, the latter between rival vice gangs. At the next level, Maria is the mother of probably Gilbert Hernandez's most-loved character from decades of *Love & Rockets* magazine, Luba; the story fills in a lot of detail in Maria's backstory, including why Gorgo, the scarred old man who recurs in the life of Luba and her half-sisters in other *L&R* stories, cares for them so much and is so protective of them. But then there's a third level. Luba's half-sister Fritz is a B-movie actress; Hernandez has done three previous graphic novels portraying her films – a wonderful mixing of two pop-culture genres, which is why this is so stark, so brutal, so over-the-top – and in *Maria M*, Fritz is playing her own mother. So it's a graphic novel rendering of a B-movie version of the life of a gangster's wife, played by her daughter, who is one of Hernandez's own characters... But you don't need to know all the levels of metafictional complexity to appreciate this simply as a wonderfully dark *film noir* comic.

SEND REVIEW DISCS TO: FORTEAN TIMES, PO BOX 71602, LONDON E17 0QD, UK.

Bewitched

A pair of extra-laden, remastered rarities feature publicity-seeking 'King of the Witches' Alex Sanders and a bevy of softcore porn actors selling 1970s audiences on the supposed practices of 'Wicca'



Legend of the Witches & Secret Rites

Dir Malcolm Leigh/Derek Ford, UK 1970/1971
BFI £14.99 (Dual Format)

A strange creation myth about Diana, the Moon, loving Lucifer, the Sun, giving birth to all of nature. A blindfolded naked young man led on a perilous trail through trees and rocks before being accepted into a group of naked witches dancing around a fire. Odd reinterpretations of history, including Robin Hood, the Bayeux Tapestry and the Order of the Garter, all based on the supposition that present-day witchcraft is the true continuation of the Old Religion of these Isles: "Witches were the priests and priestesses of a religion believed in and practised by the whole population before the arrival of Christianity."

Malcolm Leigh's *Legend of the Witches*, a documentary about what witches supposedly believe and do, is something of a classic, and very much a film of its time. In 1970 Margaret Murray's erroneous ideas still held sway among British witches. But most of all it's a film about the beliefs and fascinations of the self-styled

It starts with a deliberately clichéd black magic ritual

and somewhat publicity-seeking "King of the Witches", Alex Sanders (1926-88).

In her excellent essay in the DVD's accompanying booklet, Dr Christina Oakley Harrington, founder of Treadwell's esoteric bookshop in London, acknowledges the things that Sanders (and so this film) portrays correctly. "But in much of the film," she writes, "Sanders is skiing off-piste, down mountain slopes of his own vivid individualised imagination." The creation myth is not Wiccan at all, but Sanders' own invention; the god of Wicca is certainly not Lucifer. Rituals invoking a death curse and sacrificing a cockerel, shown in the film, are absolutely not part of Wicca. Neither is the Black Mass led by Sanders under a leaning crucifix. They're all hugely dramatic – "Sanders was clearly having a wonderful time," she says – but they have nothing to do with Wicca.

On the same DVD, Derek Ford's

Secret Rites (1971) is great fun. It starts with a deliberately clichéd Hammer Horror-style black magic ritual, before cutting to Sanders saying that this is not the reality of today's witchcraft. This film is also Sanders from beginning to end, including the OTT ritual it begins with. It follows the introduction of young hairdresser Penny to Wicca, and her initiation into Sanders's Notting Hill coven. But the film is not as it appears: it was shot, not in Sanders's home/temple but in a well-lit studio; and although some of the coven may have been genuine members, some, including the "initiate", actress Penny Beeching (*Up Pompeii!*, Morecambe & Wise) were straight actors, and others were porn actors. When *Secret Rites* was first released, it was paired with the soft porn film *Suburban Wives* from the same director.

There's a host of extras on the DVD, including a thoughtful commentary on *Secret Rites* by BFI archivists William Fowler and Vic Pratt; it was Fowler who discovered the only known print of the film in the vaults of the BFI. There are rare interviews from 1957 with Dr Margaret Murray and "Dr" Gerald Gardner. There's a strange 1968 film, *The Judgment of Albion*, based on Blake's writings, including Anthony Quayle and Donald Sinden; *Getting it Straight in Notting Hill Gate*, a 25-minute documentary from 1970 showing the diversity of hippie life in the then scruffy area of London, including a superb sitar player and a live appearance by local band Quintessence; and a delightful 1924 silent movie, *The Witch's Fiddle*, with perfectly added music.

Considering their age, the remastering of both films is impressive. All in all, an utterly splendid release from the BFI.

David V Barrett



The Dark Half

Dir George A Romero, US 1993
Eureka Classics, £15.99 (Dual Format)

An adaptation of a Stephen King novel by genre master George A Romero: what could possibly go wrong? Well, quite a lot as it turns out. For starters, the premise is frankly a bit silly. Critically acclaimed but impoverished novelist and college lecturer Thad Beaumont (Timothy Hutton) has been writing crime thrillers under the pseudonym George Stark. He recognises that this is crude, violent trash, but the Stark novels are bestsellers, so he keeps going. Not until a blackmailer (Robert Joy) threatens to out him does Beaumont decide to 'fess up and kill off his alter ego. Only Stark isn't ready to go quietly into the good night and becomes a flesh-and-blood homicidal maniac (also played by Hutton). He starts to murder Beaumont's nearest and dearest to force him to continue writing the novels that keep Stark 'alive'. Naturally, the police (foremost among them Michael Rooker) investigating the murders think this is horseshit and suspect that Beaumont himself may be the killer.

The police are right: this is horseshit. The means by which Stark becomes flesh and blood are never made clear, which leaves a gaping hole in the middle of everything. It has something to do with sparrows and a vestigial twin found in Beaumont's brain. I know, right?

Assuming one can get past that, the film is essentially a highbrow slasher movie delivered in a second-rate De Palma fashion. Romero was a fine director, but I don't think stylish visuals were his strength. There is admittedly one fantastic sequence where a hapless journalist is bumped off in a dark corridor, intermittently illuminated by flashes of brilliant colour, but the rest is shot in a rather bland manner. One can



only imagine what Dario Argento might have made of this material. In fact, one doesn't have to imagine because Argento's own *Tenebrae* deals with very similar themes.

Another problem is that, at a shade over two hours, the film is way too long. The second half gets bogged down in a lot of driving about as Beaumont tries to evade the police while trying to put a stop to Stark's killing spree. The conclusion, too, drags; there are at least three points at which the film could have ended, but it grinds remorselessly on until it reaches an actual ending that has to be seen to be believed.

The cast is also an issue. Timothy Hutton, Amy Madigan (as Beaumont's wife) and Julie Harris (as a funky old university colleague of Beaumont's) are fine actors all, but are not what you might call charismatic. The memorable performances come from the supporting players, namely Rooker – playing against type as a kindly cop – and Joy, one of Hollywood's unsung actors. For true cinéastes there's also the chance to savour the final screen performances of the veteran's veteran, Royal Dano.

Having said all that, the extra features on the disc are very interesting and shed light on the film's troubled production. Reading between the lines, Romero didn't regard it very highly. Interviews with the cast and crew reveal some thinly-veiled criticism of Method actor Hutton, described at one point as "a pain in the ass" due to his insistence on remaining in character at all times and behaving in a way that didn't make the shoot an enjoyable one. Call me a gossip but I love this sort of thing.

Another nice feature is the inclusion of an episode of Jonathan Ross's *Son of the Incredibly Strange Film Show* originally broadcast in 1989, covering Romero and Tom Savini. There's nothing revealing in it to be honest but you must remember that a) it's 30 years old, and b) at that time there was almost nothing on British TV that dealt with this sort of material in a respectful manner.

So, this set is a mixed bag, the film is a bit iffy – although probably still worth a watch if you've never seen it before – but the extras are well worth seeing.

Daniel King



THE REVEREND'S REVIEW

FT's resident man of the cloth REVEREND PETER LAWS dons his dog collar and faces the flicks that Church forgot! (www.theflicksthatchurchforgot.com)

Satanic Panic

Dir Chelsea Stardust, US 2019
Arrow Video, £19.99 (Blu-ray), £14.99 (DVD)

IT: Chapter 2

Dir Andy Muschietti, US 2019
Warner Bros, £14.99 (Blu-ray), £9.99 (DVD)

The Gallows: Act II

Dir Travis Cluff, Chris Lofing, US 2019
Lionsgate Home Entertainment, £7.99 (DVD)

The Halfway House

Dir Basil Dearden, UK 1944
Studiocanal, £14.99 (Blu-ray), £11.99 (DVD)

The Amazing Mr Blunden

Dir Lionel Jeffries, UK 1972
Second Sight, £25.99 (Ltd Edition Blu-ray)

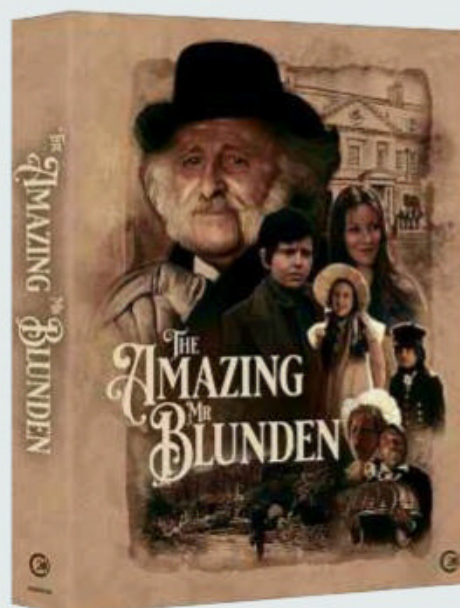
Strap in folks, because we're about to ride the full horror spectrum this month, from all-out-gore to the sweetly homespun spookiness of a family ghost story. Just so you're clear what end of the scale we're starting with, *Satanic Panic* features rubbery intestines being dragged two-handed from a fella's mouth while a pair of women are impaled on a giant, strap-on dildo drill. The fun starts when Sam, a cash strapped singer, takes a job at Home Run Pizza. When she's stiffed on a tip at the door of a plush mansion, she pops in to ask for the cash... and stumbles into a full-on, *Eyes Wide Shut*-style Satanic coven. They're prepping for a ritual to invoke Baphomet – but they've accidentally killed the virgin they had in stock. When they realise Sam qualifies, it's an all-out chase to strap her to the altar. The smart script from Grady Hendrix elevates the action with socio-political quips about the US class war.



It leaves a cosy feeling, as if you'd spent the afternoon with old friends

Great stuff.

The gore continues with *IT: Chapter 2*, which sees the kids from the first part all grown up, yet still tormented by masochistic spider-clown Pennywise. It's undoubtedly well made, and there are scary moments, but at almost three hours it feels like an overlong string of horror set-pieces. Sure, the book



is great, and I still enjoyed both films – but this is like an R-Rated version of the *Goosebumps* movie.

I was weirdly taken with *The Gallows: Act II*, about an aspiring student actress who tries to boost her YouTube channel by taking the supernatural 'Charlie Challenge'. Soon she's stalked by the spirit of a phantom hangman. I'm not sure why I liked this; it's generic and silly, with some truly groanworthy CGI. It's not even in the 'so bad it's good' category. I think I just found the basic approach refreshingly noble, after the emotionally wrung, mega-budget melodrama of *IT*.

We crank the horror way down now with *The Halfway House*, a 1944 supernatural drama from Ealing Studios, in which a cast of troubled characters converges on a mysterious old countryside inn... but why do the proprietor and his daughter cast no shadow and have no reflection? Is there supernatural mystery afoot? There certainly is, old chap. You'll chuckle at the clipped RP accents, but give it time and you'll find a thoughtful fortean tale here.

Finally, we have the kind-hearted creepiness of *The Amazing Mr Blunden*, featuring a spooky turn from Lionel Jeffries, better known for directing *The Railway Children*. In a plot device that pre-dates *The Shining*, a war widow and her family are struggling financially, so when mysterious solicitor Mr Blunden offers them a chance to be caretakers of a derelict country mansion they say yes... even if the place might be haunted. Hordes of fifty-somethings adore this film, and watching for the first time I can see why. It's a clever paranormal tale, and it has such a gentle heart – as in the closing credits, when each character says a polite "Goodbye" and "Hope you enjoyed it!" direct to camera. It leaves a nice, cosy feeling, as if you'd spent the afternoon with old friends.

THE HAUNTED GENERATION

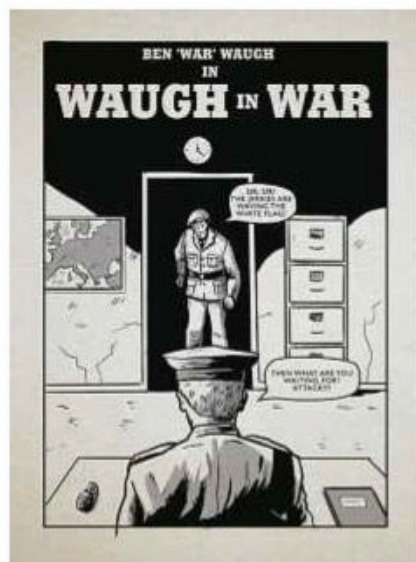
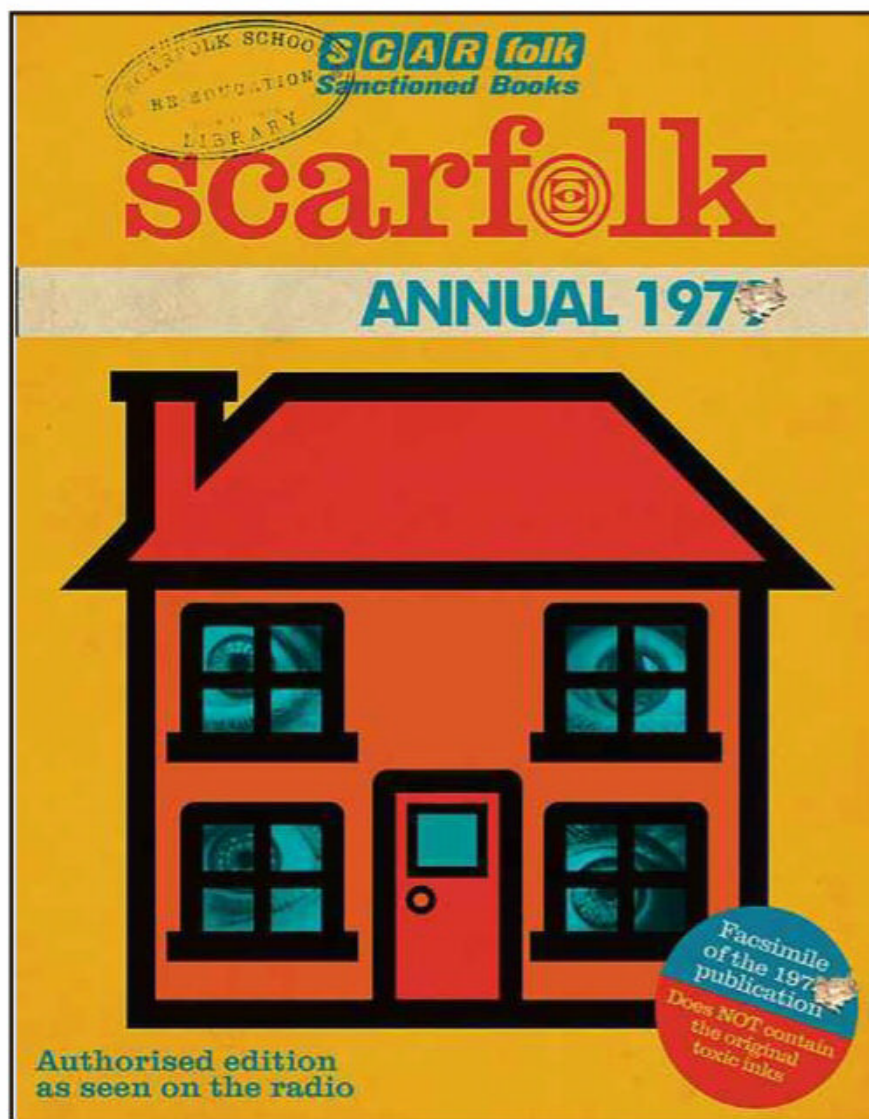
BOB FISCHER ROUNDS UP THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE
PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY...

"I suffered from night terrors," explains Richard Littler, "and I'd leave the light on so that I could see the happy cover of my Disney annual as I tried to sleep. Unfortunately, as we've seen from countless horror films, juxtaposing something creepy with something innocently childlike tends to somehow make matters worse..."

We're discussing the inspirations behind the new *Scarfolk Annual*. Since 2013, Littler has been the self-appointed "Mayor of Scarfolk", the grim, north-western English town that has provided the setting for a cavalcade of spoof information posters, book covers and magazine advertisements; one of which ("If you suspect your child has RABIES don't hesitate SHOOT") was even mistakenly included in the Civil Service Quarterly as part of a 100-year celebration of bona fide Government posters (see FT377:8). This new publication sees him turning his genius for pastiching the clunky, washed-out design and authoritarian tones of 1970s information culture into a magnificently dark homage to the hardback World Distributors annuals of his childhood.

"Another oft-thumbed annual was *Ghost Special No. 2*," he continues. "Which is where, as a six-year-old, I first encountered Borley Rectory. A factual feature alongside *Shiver & Shake* and *Monster Fun*-style cartoons. There weren't any ghostly photos – just pictures of rubble and remains – but it still unsettled me..."

This 1970s predilection for providing primary school-age children with laughably inappropriate reading material is sent up with unerring accuracy in the *Scarfolk Annual*. The gung-ho *Commando*-style comic strip 'Waugh in War' sees unhinged army officer Ben 'War' Waugh determined to execute his own soldiers; elsewhere there are illustrated guides to identifying "Council Surveillance Agents", and



advice on "How to Survive a Nuclear Thing", reassuringly explaining that "national security terminology typically employed to describe the stages of a nuclear threat will be replaced by pleasant, friendly words. If you hear 'Flopsy Bunny' you should expect catastrophic, irreversible annihilation."

"The 21st century is getting closer to Scarfolk – or any number of dystopias – than it

has been for a while," laments Richard. "If real-world events begin echoing motifs from dystopias, many of which are cautionary tales, it's time to make sure that totalitarian and socially-extreme ideas don't start to become normalised."

And on a lighter note, who was the scariest member of the troupe of *Play School* toys, as parodied in the grisly 'Scar School'?

"Hamble," he replies, instantly. "She's a cursed toy. She's supposed to be a baby, but she looks about 80 years old. She's like a witch, or the dwarf in Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now*."

The *Scarfolk Annual* ("Does NOT contain the original toxic inks") is out now, published by William Collins.

It's been a bumper few weeks for fans of Littler's unique brand of dystopian satire, as October also saw the release of the pilot episode of his animated series *Dick & Stewart*.

A disturbing 12 minutes of lovingly-crafted paranoia, it uses to great effect the gentle pace and limited colour palettes of such teatime favourites as *Mr Benn* and *Mary, Mungo and Midge* to lampoon the rise of 21st century surveillance culture. Narrated, in gentle homage to 1970s voiceover king Ray Brooks, by *The Mighty Boosh*'s Julian Barrett, it follows the adventures of innocent schoolboy Dick and the sentient eyeball Stewart – all that remains of Dick's former best friend after a mysterious playground accident. Together, they are ensnared by a sinister "man" who encourages them to play "a special game of I-Spy... all you have to do is watch and listen to everything your Mummy and Daddy do and say, and write it all down for me."

"I loved the cartoons you mention," says Richard. "I also liked *The Magic Ball* and anything by Smallfilms... *Ivor the Engine*, *Bagpuss*. The slower pace gave many of the animations a dreamlike quality, which I responded to. Compounded for me because I was always off sick with colds, flu or fevers, which cast a surreal and sometimes dark shadow over the programmes. I still remember that, during one fever, the weird, unblinking eyes of the background characters in *Mr Benn* unsettled me..."

A woozy, analogue synth soundtrack is provided by Chris Sharp, in his guise as Concretism, further consolidating the atmosphere of 1970s unsettlement, although – again – Littler is adamant that his creations are very much concerned with contemporary, 21st-century issues, particularly those of control and surveillance. "We're frequently at risk of signing away our privacy," he says. "I don't think law has caught up with technological advances yet, so there's a constant tug-of-war between what is legal and what isn't or shouldn't be. Reality TV and phone cams

have also normalised the idea of constantly being filmed and broadcast.”

And indeed, as the cartoon Dick is confined to bed, a camera emerges from his mouth, microphones from his ears, and a transmission aerial sprouts from the top of his head. The pilot episode can be found on the newly launched *Dick & Stewart* YouTube channel.

Meanwhile, those seeking a more rural flavour of wrongness will be delighted to hear of further developments on the Black Meadow. This bleak, secluded area of the North York Moors, in the shadow of the iconic RAF Fylingdales early warning station, has long since provided the inspiration for a multimedia exploration of dark folklore and Cold War disquiet, helmed by writer Chris Lambert and musician Kev Oyston. “For centuries the Meadow has been a hotbed of strange phenomena, mysterious creatures and bizarre happenings,” claims Chris. “The most famous of these, as everybody knows, is the village that appears when the mist is high...”

A visit to the Black Meadow website (at blackmeadowtales.blogspot.com) will confirm that both Lambert and Oyston are masters at blurring the lines between genuine folk tales (both ancient and modern) and outright invention. Did folklore investigator Professor Roger Mullins, of York University, really vanish on the moor in 1972, and become the subject of a lost Radio 4 documentary? Make your own judgements. Lambert coyly describes himself as “a teacher, a writer and a liar”. His new book, *The Black Meadow Archive*, will be available in early January, and is a beautiful collection of surreal and grisly folk talks, where ‘the Blackberry Ghost’ meets ‘the Ticking Policeman’. And a new collection of similarly titled music by Oyston, recording as The Soulless Party, will be released at the same time.

Oyston has also been busy compiling an LP of original music inspired by Stephen Brotherstone and Dave Lawrence’s *Scarred For Life* book. The book, published in 2017, is an exhaustive compendium of the 1970s TV programmes that traumatised



their respective childhoods, and the album invites veterans of the haunted movement to contribute music inspired by their own memories of the era, either alternate themes for existing programmes, or invented title music for fictional shows. The results are tremendous fun: The Heartwood Institute’s ‘Women Against The Wire’ sounds like the opening to some hard-hitting BBC2 investigation into the Greenham Common peace camps; The Home Current’s ‘Summer In Marstrand’ is pure half-term Scandinavian

animation (think Moomins, but intent on evil); and Keith Seatman’s ‘Words from the Wireless’ recreates the terror once instilled in him by the (literally) dream-like 1972 series *Escape Into Night*.

The album concludes on a poignant note: ‘Be Like A Child’ by Carl Matthews is a genuine piece of beautifully melancholy 1984 electronica from an artist whose life was cut tragically short by cancer; all proceeds from the album are going to Cancer Research UK. It’s available now, on the Castles In Space label.

Elsewhere, it’s always a delight to welcome new material from Jon Brooks; often to be found recording for Ghost Box Records in his guise as The Advisory Circle, but new album *Emotional Freedom Techniques* is freshly available to download on his own Cafe Kaput label. A beautifully soothing and meditative collection of ambient electronica, it both evokes and creates a perfect sense of stillness and stasis. It’s available from cafekaput.bandcamp.com. I can also recommend Hattie Cooke’s album *The Sleepers*, an evocative, synth-heavy concept album detailing the consequences of a mysterious, worldwide sleeping sickness; and the self-titled debut album by The Central Office of Information, a beautifully-packed collection of entrancing melodic radiophonica and ambient disquiet, all produced by Kent-based artist Alex Cargill.

And what better way to round off the year than with a brace of releases from... well, A Year In The Country? Stephen Prince’s ongoing quest to explore the shimmering connections between folk music, electronica and a sense of lost pastoralism has borne fruit in the shape of a new book, *Straying from the Pathways*, a typically comprehensive collection of essays on some of the movement’s more esoteric influences, from *Detectorists* to *Edge of Darkness*. And a charming new album, *The Quietened Journey*, invites contributors including The Heartwood Institute and Howlround to create music inspired by memories of abandoned railway lines, stations and roads. Anyone looking for a dose of bucolic calm amidst the frenzy of the festive season would be well advised to use it as the soundtrack for an icy ramble in their favourite overgrown sidings.

Visit the new Haunted Generation website at www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk, send details of new releases, or memories of the original “haunted” era to hauntedgeneration@gmail.com, or find me on Twitter... @bob_fischer

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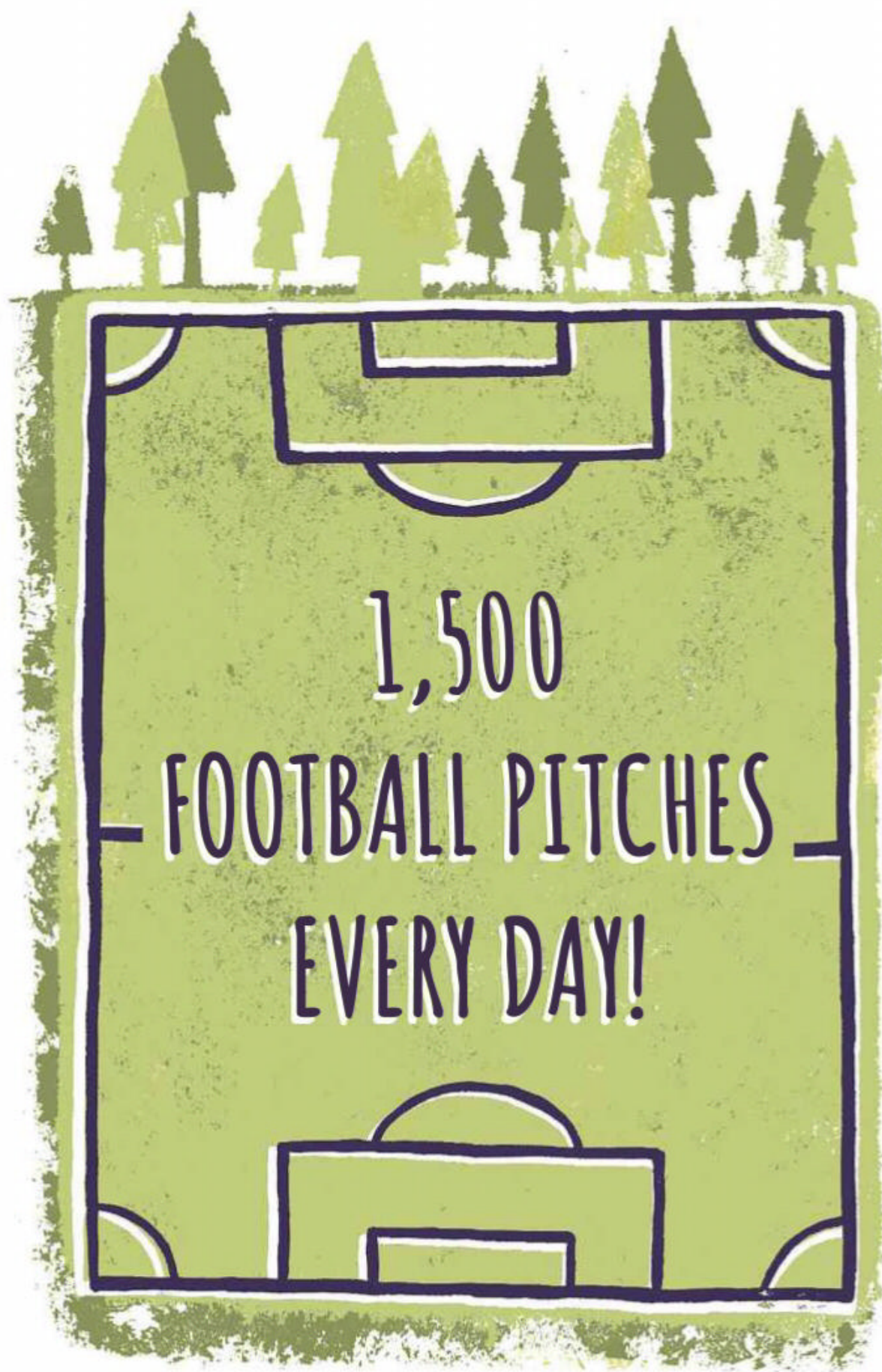
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Faceless Ghosts

The feature on faceless phantoms reminded me of the case featured in the ITV series *Arthur C Clarke's World of Strange Powers*, in which a young miner at Silverwood Colliery in 1980 supposedly came across a spectre of a miner that was also completely faceless. It terrified him so much that he never went down the pit again. He is actually interviewed on the DVD of the series in the episode entitled 'Ghosts, Apparitions and Haunted Houses', and the sense of fear that he expresses when describing the encounter makes me convinced that he saw something inexplicable.

Phil Brand
London

There's a different take on faceless ghosts [FT385:18ff] in Albert Budden's book *Psychic Close Encounters* (1999): "Apparitions are consistently reported as pale, grey or dark with indistinct facial features and extremities... These constraints reveal the limited ability of the unconscious to produce colour and fine detail... The unconscious abbreviates reality in the production of dream imagery" (p.65). Like Alan Murdie, Budden instances the Cheltenham "lady with a handkerchief". He also points out that many UFO entities appear to lurk behind helmets or visors or have very simplified features.

Richard George
St Albans, Hertfordshire

"I am burning"

The haunted forest of Hoia Baci in Transylvania [FT382:32-36] brings to mind a story my late mother told me many years ago. Of Transylvanian Saxon background, she was born in Kolozvar-Klausenburg-Cluj in the 1920s. When I was a teenager I often asked her if there really were vampires (and werewolves) in Transylvania. She didn't believe so, apart from the many wolves heard throughout winter. However, she did tell me a story that her grandmother had told her. It seems that the local Catholic church in Cluj was holding Mass in the cathedral, celebrating the life of a recently deceased

SIMULACRA CORNER



Dinge lizard

On a walk near the defunct Dingle Farm Tearooms in Appleton, near Warrington, Gary Dennett saw this wooden lizard in a tree.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to Fortean Times, PO Box 2409, London NW5 4NP or to sieveking@forteantimes.com.

local prelate. This was the first step to becoming a saint. As holy water was about to be sprinkled on the corpse, the body sat up in the coffin and said very clearly, "I am burning". Needless to say, there was a stampede to exit the church and lots of fainting and screaming. This story has stayed with me for over 50 years, and I have told it to my three children. Was this a 19th century urban legend, a true story, or a bedtime tale? Are there similar stores out there?

Eugene Maynard
Cobourg, Ontario

Solid Shadow

I have a Cthulhu tamagotchi on my phone. He has dungarees and a centurion's hat he won't take off, and every day I feed him fish, or pizza, clean him up, and re-enact his destruction of coastal villages to sate his appetite for destruction and get him some souls to buy stuff

with. Yet I'm not one of these people who believes in Cthulhu – the shady cultist types in the hoods in the stories don't exist. In a way I'm affectionately mocking the idea of Cthulhu. However, there are people who believe the *Necronomicon* is real and utilise Cthulhu in Chaos Magic. How would they view what I'm doing?

Which brings us to The Satanic Temple [FT383:42-43]. Their campaign against fundamentalist domination and in favour of pluralism is carried out without belief in Satan, or even in evil, but what does it do to fundamentalists? The first time I saw their statue of Baphomet in the pages of *FT*, I (as a person of no fixed beliefs) was uncertain of their aims. They said they were inviting people to 'worship' as an atheistic demonstration of freedom from conventional religion, but a little niggler said, well that's what Satanists would say to recruit people, isn't it? According to the old shtick from Church doctrine to Dennis Wheatley, all that matters

to Satanists, (the 'real' thing so to speak, the ones that a lot of fundamentalist Christians actually believe are out there), is to take souls away from God. Recruiting them to atheism would be all they'd need to damn them, and if they could convince them of the non-existence of evil, and tempt them into seeing morality as merely a choice, that would seal the deal, right? And, while doing that, if they could get people to carry out 'fake' rituals in praise of Baphomet, well that would just put the cherry on the mischief. If I, as a spiritual floating voter, can come up with these suspicions, what are fundamentalist preachers using this fuel for?

Let me just reiterate: I think it highly improbable that there are any sincere Mocatass or Karswells hiding amongst the young Satanic Temple guys, but that's not the point. Their theatrics hand an incredibly useful tool to fundamentalist believers, which all their clarification, explanation, and rational argument has no power to dispel or refute. They've given them proof of an enemy, and in a world where more enlightened, caring and thoughtful forms of Christianity like the Church of England are dying of indifference, that's a powerful thing to have.

To paraphrase the Tao: "What you fight you make real."

Dean Teasdale
By email

Tiny astronauts

Mary Worrall [FT385:70] is quite right in her memory. The series was called *Out of This World*, and the episode in question (transmitted on 11 August 1962) was called "Pictures Cannot Lie" – the point being that the television link failed to show the man responding from Earth that the astronauts, though humanoid, were diminutive. At the end, the Earth respondent ran out looking for the spaceship at the landing coordinates that it had been given – and trod on it.

The following morning I went to see our local newsagent (another science fiction addict) and delivered my comment: "There's a spaceship at the bottom of my garden. / The aliens are very, very

LETTERS

small. / If you go out you must look where you're treading, / For that would be a stupid place to fall."

The series made a vivid impression on me. I recall Jane Asher starring in "The Cold Equations" and a story about Earth sending its criminals to inhabit the bodies of people on another planet (with the great end line something like: "We used to do the same thing a long time ago. We called it Botany Bay"). Also, in one episode Patrick Mc-Nee played an alien. The image of John Steed from *The Avengers* in a toga has stayed with me for many decades – amazing what old age does to one.

Martin Jenkins
London

Re Mary Worrall's letter concerning tiny aliens: *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* offers us the story of the G'Gugvuntts and the Vl'hurges, two war-like species that decide to launch a joint attack on Earth. After thousands of years crossing a vast distance, they finally reach our planet where, "Due to a terrible miscalculation of scale, the entire battle fleet was swallowed by a small dog." The Guide adds that this sort of thing happens all the time.

Chris Tye
By email

Folk Horror in the Sixties

I was reading Gail-Nina Anderson's piece on the folk horror revival [FT381:36-43] when what should come on the TV but a 2017 episode of *Endeavour* called 'Harvest', set in the early 1960s. The folk horror content

didn't develop in the plot, but the ingredients were all there: the discovery of a 2,000-year-old sacrificial victim, an oppressive atmosphere, close-mouthed unwelcoming villagers, a Tarot-reading wise (?) woman, an eerie scarecrow, and pagan customs for the Autumn Equinox. The title also reminded me that America did produce a work based on the 'old ways': Tom Tryon's novel *Harvest Home*, which was published in June 1973 (*The Wicker Man* came out in December). It only needed a change in the accents for it to transfer to Lower Quinton [FT381:44-45].

The main plot in *Endeavour* involved a potential major disaster at a nuclear power plant averted by the bravery of Thursday and Morse. The fact that the episode began in black and white got me thinking about the Haunted Generation [FT354:30-37, 381:63]. It occurred to me that there have been many haunted generations (e.g. growing up during the world wars), but the idea as expressed in *FT* only takes form with developing media. On this basis I would suggest that if you want a really haunted generation look to those whose formative years were between 1955 and 1965. The TV was black and white, the images often ghostly and the tales ghastly – *The Trollenberg Terror*, *Quatermass* and the first *Dr Who* – and there's something about black and white that increases the unease. Maybe it's because at the time all the real war film footage was like that. At the same time, Armageddon or its aftermath became a major theme in SF (John Wyndham's novels and the brilliantly conceived *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, which every forteen should read) and the real

world outside with its bomb sites, rationing and the Cold War was pretty bleak. During the Cuban Missile Crisis, I wasn't at all sure that I would reach the end of my teens,

let alone ripe old age. Peter Watkins's *The War Game* may not have got a TV screening back then, but it went around the university circuit and that's where I first saw it. I think the haunted music for that generation was produced at that time rather than later. Some of it was poetic and chilling (Dylan's 'Let Me Die In My Footsteps' and 'A Hard Rain's A-gonna Fall') and some execrable ('Eve of Destruction'). Or maybe it just revealed itself in musical and other excesses of the late Sixties and early Seventies.

Ron Gardner
Upton Snodsbury, Worcestershire

Thirteen at the Table

As a tribute to the much-missed Nils Erik Grande, in addition to his letter concerning tables of 13 at dinner [FT384:73] I offer the following tale related in the 100th edition of *The Chap* magazine in a restaurant review of Kaspar's at the Savoy. Kaspar's features an Art Deco sculpture named Kaspar the Cat, created in 1927 to take his place at tables of 13 guests. This was supposedly instigated after an unfortunate incident in 1898 when diamond magnate Joel Woolf found his dinner party of 14 at the Savoy reduced by one, and was murdered two weeks later in Johannesburg. Ever since then, Kaspar has been offered as a 14th guest at any table of 13. I'm not sure why it took 29 years to come up with this solution, but I wonder if there are any other examples where a substitute 14th diner is offered?

Dene Vanstone
By email

Species

While Mark Greener gives a spirited defence of orthodox species classifications, [FT385:71], I'm afraid that Nietzsche is on the side of the disagreements voiced by Ulrich Magin and Philip Bolt. In *The Will To Power* section 521, he claims that one should not understand this compulsion to construct concepts, species,

forms, purposes, laws ("a world of identical cases") as if they enabled us to fix the real world; but as a compulsion to arrange a world for ourselves in which our existence is made possible; we thereby create a world that is calculable, simplified, comprehensible, etc., for us. Elsewhere he suggests we do this to give ourselves a spurious sense of power over the world by claiming to 'know' it, when in reality the world has ultimate power over us. I trust you will not think this a specious argument.

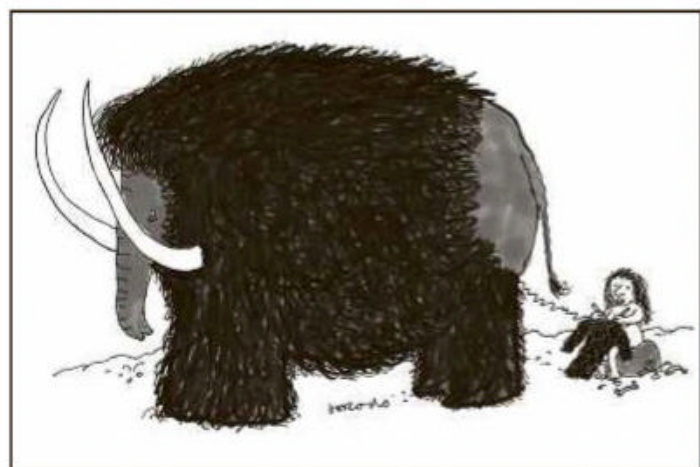
Mike Harding
London

Psychiatric prejudice

I was deeply impressed by the powerful letter by Zoe-Dawn Anderson on autism and Applied Behaviour Analysis (FT383:76). Sadly, it rang completely true to me (though I am not myself autistic). You ran another mental health related story in the same issue on hearing voices, including some quotes from Peter Bullimore of the Hearing Voices Network ('Hear Hear', FT383:29).

These two items give snapshots of a wider picture, which is that psychiatry and mental health services internationally all too often end up causing harm, because they focus on the interpretation by 'expert' professionals of their patients' experiences, instead of actually listening to what patients say about their own experiences and trying to work with them on their own terms. A protest/civil rights movement grew out of this, with some identifying themselves as "survivors of the mental health system". This movement was perhaps most prominent in the 1980s and 1990s, but it still exists. Indeed, the Hearing Voices Network might be regarded as part of this movement.

The usefulness and validity of schizophrenia as a diagnosis, for example, has been strongly challenged over the years, both by mental health system survivors and by some professionals working in mental health. If, as your 'Hear hear' piece points out, people who have not been





diagnosed as schizophrenic hear voices, then how can voice-hearing be a major symptom of a mental illness called schizophrenia? In fact, the whole edifice of psychiatric diagnosis has been strongly criticised; and powerful arguments questioning the validity of psychiatry as a scientific discipline have been made (I won't go into all that here, but as an example the Critical Psychiatry website <www.criticalpsychiatry.co.uk> has articles on this topic). The evidence for the effectiveness of medication in the mental health field, too, has been questioned; the influence of pharmaceutical companies on research findings has been exposed in, for example, such works as Ben Goldacre's book *Bad Pharma* (2013).

A widely accepted area of medicine where most professionals in the field present themselves as the experts, but whose fundamental assumptions, including mental illness diagnoses, are challenged and rejected by some patients (and some health professionals) who find it doesn't fit their actual experience – how weird, indeed how forteen, is that?

Peter Relton

Ilkley, West Yorkshire

Usborne's Ghosts

My compliments on the article in last month's edition regarding the re-issue of the *World of the Unknown: Ghosts* [FT385:32-37]. I have vivid memories of repeatedly borrowing this book from my local library as a small child in the 1980s, and of course being thoroughly disturbed by the 'ghost photos' on page 29, which being a small boy I lacked the faculty to critically evaluate. Having been alerted to the reissue, I duly bought a copy. Another book that conjures vivid memories was my grandmother's *Hamlyn Book of Ghosts in Fact and Fiction*, which I read avidly, despite it being aimed at an older audience (age-appropriateness was never a concern for my grandmother, who also let me watch *The Evil Dead* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*

when I was about eight). Having now obtained copies of both books, I am somewhat struck by the extent to which some of the material overlaps – to the extent that my faulty memory conflated some of the content between books. They are also stylistically similar, insofar as they both delight in recounting tales of – shall we say – questionable provenance, in the interests of telling a good story. To anyone who enjoyed the Usborne book I would also recommend Hamlyn's effort.

Ian I'Anson

By email

I read with relish the article on Usborne's *Ghosts* book, a tome I first discovered at the age of seven in the library of my first school (Oakham Primary School nr Dudley, West Midlands). I had chosen the topic of ghosts as part of an individual research project that each class member had to carry out, and found the book so inspirational that I continued my interest in the paranormal over the next four decades, culminating in receiving a first class Masters degree this year with my dissertation on the subject of paranormal hauntings and deliverance ministry.

My favourite article in the book was the double-page spread on "The haunted house", and thankfully I have never had the misfortune to hear a grandfather clock strike 13. A strange occurrence happened at my primary school regarding this book: one night, the school library had several books ripped into many pieces and sadly *Ghosts* was one of those which suffered this unfortunate fate, which annoyed me as I frequently borrowed it from there.

Recently, in an attempt to see if I had imagined the incident, I reached out to a Facebook group for members of the school and found others also remembered the "book ripping" incident. No culprit was ever found and on reflection I wonder if they were looking on the wrong plane of existence!

Matt Arnold

Pleasley, Nottinghamshire



Angel or demon?

The recent folk horror revival article [FT381:36-43] had me rushing off to order the bizarre 1974 film *Penda's Fen*. My main interest is in its setting just outside Malvern in the Midlands – I don't live very far away and my friend who lives there is involved in well-dressing. I'm aware of the folksy things that go on in rural Worcestershire.

There's a certain scene in the film where protagonist Stephen is visited by a golden winged figure that looks almost identical to Jacob Epstein's nearly nude statue of Lucifer, 'The Archangel Lucifer', held by Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery (BMAG). The figure appears again in the film in silhouette, rising up from behind the Malvern Hills. It made sense for it to be Lucifer appearing to Stephen because a prominent theme in the film is his sexuality and what he initially interprets, as a vicar's straitlaced son, as sinful temptation because he's attracted to other men.

A mini documentary is included on the DVD, where the makers of *Penda's Fen* explain its genesis. It was produced at the BBC's Pebble Mill studios in Birmingham, which made me certain that Stephen's visitor was based on Epstein's Lucifer. The two-ton brass statue arrived at BMAG in 1947, so was definitely in place when

Penda's Fen was produced in the early 1970s. When the makers came to talk about that scene, they describe the figure as an angel, with no reference to the statue at all. But of course, Lucifer was an angel before he fell, and Epstein's title of his piece emphasises that – his statue looks like an angel without the stereotypical demonic trappings of horns or pointy tail. Epstein's St Michael, in his 'St Michael's Victory over the Devil' at Coventry Cathedral, is a similar winged figure, but lacks the burnished quality of his Lucifer, which you see repeated in *Penda's Fen*. There's a rumour, which may or may not be true, that 'The Archangel Lucifer' had to be moved from BMAG's tearoom because no one would sit at the statue's right hand.

Helen Barrell

Birmingham



IT HAPPENED TO ME...

First-hand accounts of strange experiences from *FT* readers

Echoes

A phenomenon related to Jungian coincidence, or synchronicity, runs through my life. For want of a better name I call it 'echoes'. Simply put, this typically involves a person I have just met, or had a brief acquaintance with; someone who usually means nothing to me personally. A short while after our last meeting, I suddenly meet him or her in the street – and then, never again. I am of course aware that this can be explained away by statistics, but there is something compelling about the pattern "meeting indifferent person after a short while, then never again". (I also see this as distinct from meeting someone you know and care about by chance in the street, maybe after many years – *that's* statistics...)

The first time I became aware of it I was about 19 years old, in my first year at university. I was visiting a friend at his lodgings, and one of his friends dropped in. The next day I bumped into the same guy on campus. Not very impressive, meeting a student on campus... but I never saw him again. And the student body was 20,000 strong, so it wasn't that small a world.

Since then, it has happened so many times that I have lost count. I just shrug and think, 'Another echo'. I've forgotten most of them, but from time to time I've tried to list the ones I remember, and even those number several dozen. A typical example happened about 1996, when the company I worked for was being wound up and everyone would be out of a job. Just before, we'd hired a young woman as a receptionist or something, and in the short time available I never got to know her better than saying 'hello' in the morning. Just a few days after the company closed, I met her downtown... and then, never again.

Nils Erik Grande
Oslo, Norway



"He'll put you right"

The Hampshire County Lunatic Asylum opened in 1852, and became Knowle Mental Hospital in 1923. This institution came to my attention in the early 1980s, when I worked at a technical engineering company at one end of a long, winding country lane. At the other end of this lane, about a mile away, was the hospital – a large, dark and foreboding Gothic Revival edifice, surrounded by a high-security wire fence. Locals and work colleagues told me that I might well encounter some of the patients, as they frequently wandered along the lane. When accompanied, they could visit the local shops. Most were suffering from what was then known as senile dementia, while others were sedated to make them 'manageable'. I was advised to avoid making eye contact or striking up a conversation. It was advice I thought was extreme and was content to ignore it.

One cold November morning, barely distinguishable in a heavy mist, a figure appeared

The patients frequently wandered along the lane

in the lane, approaching at a slow, steady pace. It was a very thin man of about 70 in a shabby black suit, with keen watchful eyes and a white beard. I nodded to the stranger, who had stopped and was standing motionless, unblinkingly watching me. Suddenly he raised a hand to point at me and began walking slowly towards me. His mouth opened and closed, but no words emerged. It looked as though he was crying and laughing at once. He stopped a foot or so from me and said: "Doctor Sandison, Doctor Sandison. He'll always put you right. You mark my words". He became very animated and produced a folded piece of paper from the inside pocket of his jacket and passed it to me. On it was the name Sandison written in green ink. When I tried to give it back he

refused to take it. He kept saying this name again and again, sometimes clearly in a high, sharp voice and sometimes in a low whisper, furtively glancing about as if someone were coming. After a minute or so I made my excuses and went back to work, but the man remained where he stood, repeating the same things over and over. I did not see him go, but when I checked 20 minutes later he was no longer there.

In the summer of the following year I got acquainted with some members of the psychiatric nursing staff at Knowle Hospital, out walking with other staff and patients one afternoon. I told one about the elderly patient and what he had said. He laughingly told me they had not had any elderly patients at the hospital for over three years, and that it must have been a local man. I told him about the piece of paper and the name on it. The nurse said the name meant nothing to him and walked on.

I thought nothing more of it until years later when, browsing through a collection of second-hand medical and psychiatric journals, I came across an

article about a particular period in the history of Knowle Hospital. Between 1964 and 1975 a psychiatrist was working there in a field of psychotherapy that pioneered the use of lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) in the treatment of psychiatric patients. His name was Ronald Arthur Sandison. [Dr Ronald A Sandison (1916-2010) was Britain's first LSD psychotherapist. See *Albion Dreaming: A popular history of LSD in Britain* (2008) by Andy Roberts.]

I will probably never know the identity of the old man who gave me that piece of paper, but I can still picture him on that icy cold winter morning. Maybe he still walks in that long, curving country lane.

Stefan Badham

Portsmouth, Hampshire

A tale of metal polish

On Sunday 7 July 2019 I bought a large archive of a dead artist named Nona Pettersen from our local car boot sale in Ledbury, Herefordshire, for £10. The next day a tube of specialist metal polish arrived from Ireland, having been ordered by my wife two months earlier (unbeknown to me). The sender turned out to be Nona Pettersen's husband, who had buried his wife in 2015 and now lives in County Cork, selling raspberry salad dressing and metal polish.

Mark Howard

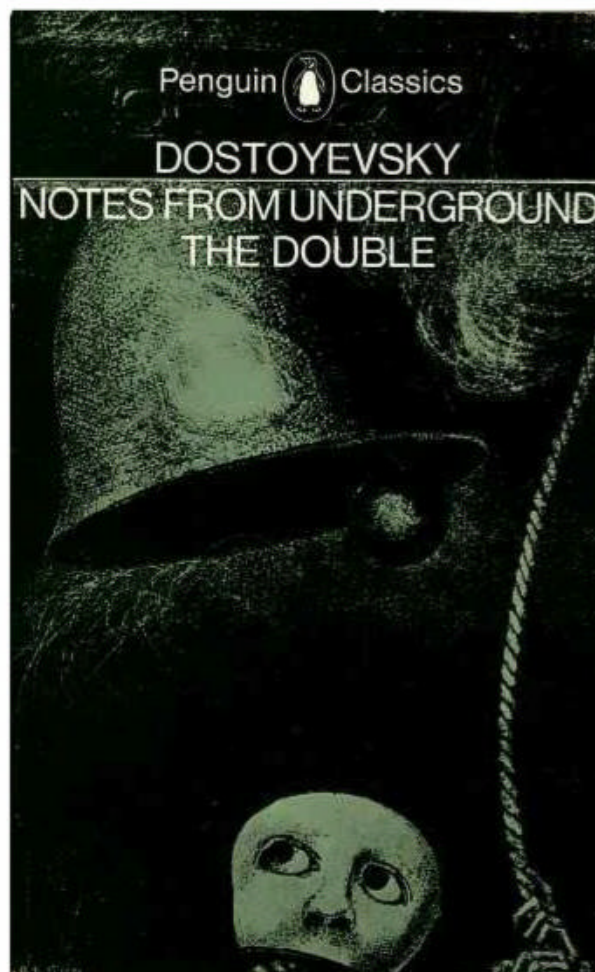
Malvern Wells, Worcestershire

Dostoyevsky replaced

In the June issue, Anthony Scales asked for other odd "lost and found" anecdotes [FT380:77]. Here's my story.

In 1981, I was returning home on the Quebec City-Ottawa train. Accompanying me were my wife Eliane, my cousin Robert and his wife, Jackie. A few weeks earlier I had lent Robert several books that the four of us were now discussing. One was Dostoyevsky's *Notes From Underground / The Double* (Penguin Classics). At the time Dostoyevsky was one of my favourite authors. Robert confessed that he'd ruined my book by accident; as upset as I was I nevertheless told him that it was OK and that I would replace it.

We continued our book discussion and finally arrived in Ottawa, where we were the last passen-



gers to leave the train. Imagine my surprise when I noticed a book on one of the empty seats: Dostoyevsky's Penguin Classics edition of *Notes From Underground / The Double*. I picked it up and it's been in my library ever since. On the title page a handwritten note reads: "For Cynthia – who has fallen in love with computers and must be persuaded not to go too far. This little book may do that. It also says, for me, thanks for much cheerful help. Victor."

Paul Boisvenue

Ottawa, Canada

Heavy footsteps

In the 1960s I lived in Ealing, west London, while teaching, but after two years I returned to New Zealand. For a change of pace I decided to teach at an all boys' prep school in a rural location. I had a very large panelled sitting room that was basically a bedsit, with one tiny window and an attractive old herringbone brick fireplace. I was completely surrounded by dormitories, filled with small snoring schoolboys. Some friends described my room as a little spooky – especially after dark.

Around 2am one night I was awakened by terrible, even threatening, footsteps leading to my door. I got the impression that somebody was very angry with me. I sat up in bed trembling, as there was very

loud hammering on my door. Moments later I crept to the door and slowly opened it. There was no one there, and no footsteps retreating or fading away, although as usual strong lights were shining down the corridor. There was not a whimper from any of the three dormitories.

Next morning, while having tea with staff on a verandah at the front of the school, I mentioned my frightening experience. Some looked quizzically at each other until someone blurted out: "That was

poor Ollie's room [the gardener]. He'd lived there for years." He wore big boots and came to a sticky end when he was thrown from his bicycle on his way to the nearest village. Maybe what I heard was his ghost trying to reclaim his old digs. Rest in peace, Ollie.

Barbara Stevens

Merivale, New Zealand

Shared dream

In the early hours of 7 February 2006 I dreamed about my grandmother, who died about 10 years earlier. In the dream, I told my partner Matt that I always used to watch *Quantum Leap* when I was at my grandmother's and that I never got to see the end – and said that I wouldn't be scared if I saw her ghost, or a ghost. Then I dreamed I walked into my bedroom and stood on one side of the bed facing the full-length mirror opposite. To my right-hand side I saw a figure – I couldn't make it out, but something was there. I then shouted out Matt's name in the dream, and then in real life, thus waking myself up. Matt then woke up. He was facing me and looking in the direction of the side of the bed that I had been standing on in my dream. "What the hell's that?" he shouted, and when I asked him what he meant, he told me that he had just seen a figure-

shaped shadow move across the room and through the wall.

Ayeisha Mann

Tollerton, Nottingham

Aged schoolboy

In the mid-1970s when I was aged between eight and 11, our family home was a "new build" on land that was part of the parish of Boughton in Northamptonshire. The area was once mainly countryside and described as "well wooded" before construction began. My most vivid memory was a particularly fitful night when I couldn't get to sleep. I was going through a stage of not liking to be in the dark so I went to my parents' bedroom. My parents slept in single beds with a gap between them which formed an aisle. Next to my father's bed was an old double-door wardrobe with a full-length mirror in the middle of it.

As I lay in my father's bed trying to get to sleep, I became aware of something 'materialising' as depicted in the original series of *Star Trek*. The effect was similar to what you see when you rub your eyes or experience the classic 'spots before your eyes' moment when getting up too fast. The spots were predominantly silver and began from the bottom forming the feet, shinbone and so on until creating a fully fleshed-out 'person'. There were no accompanying sounds. The apparition was of an elderly man with an extremely long knobby witch-like nose. He was wearing what looked like an old-fashioned schoolboy cap with a large 'W' embossed on its front. He wore shorts, but I can't remember his upper attire. He was stooped and facing the wardrobe as though looking at his reflection. I was absolutely terrified and dived under the bedclothes while my father remained asleep. I am not sure how long I stayed covered, but eventually I emerged to find the figure gone.

Years later, I spoke to my sister about this experience and discovered that she also had encountered the figure, the most pertinent detail being her mention of the cap with the imprinted 'W', which I had not disclosed beforehand to her or anyone else.

Mark Stannard

Northampton

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WHY FORTEAN?



FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing how scientists argued according to their own beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity

in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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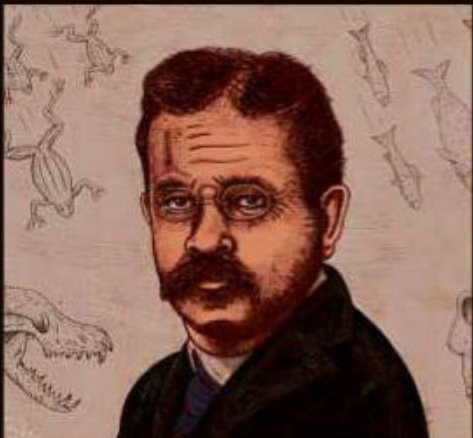
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DOGMA, DOMINANTS AND THE BOOK OF THE DAMNED



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AND MUCH MORE...**

FORTEAN TIMES 388

ON SALE 3 JAN 2020

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

At 2.22am on 28 October, police were called to Dixon's Chimney in Carlisle after resident heard shouts and wailing. The 270ft (82m) cotton mill chimney is a prominent local landmark. It was the tallest in the country – and the eighth tallest in the world – when it was built in 1836. Under cover of darkness, Robert Philip Longcake, 53, (known as Phil), had apparently climbed a ladder to the top of the chimney before falling over and dangling upside down with his boot caught between the ladder and the wall. The ladder was in place temporarily for maintenance work. “All agencies worked as quickly as possible to try and rescue the man,” said Supt Matt Kennerley of Cumbria police. “The operation involved road closures, the use of drones to assess the scene, a helicopter, and a cherry-picker brought in from Glasgow.” Police were initially able to check he was alive by communicating with him via a drone with a speaker attached. The Coastguard helicopter was unable to rescue Mr Longcake, who was shirtless and exposed to freezing temperatures. He was finally brought down at 4.45 in the afternoon, using the cherry picker to fix another ladder on the opposite side of the chimney near the top. However, he was found to be dead, having dangled for more than 14 hours. His family described him as “a strong, brave man”, but admitted he had suffered mental health problems in recent months. “He loved fell walking with his dog Ted and was a passionate musician who played the guitar, piano and accordion... Phil was a fantastic granddad to his three grandchildren, who adored him.” *theguardian.co.uk*, 29 Oct; *BBC News*, *dailymail.co.uk*, 30 Oct 2019.

A man from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, drowned while proposing to his girlfriend underwater on holiday in Tanzania on 19 September. Steven Weber and Kenesha Antoine were staying in a submerged cabin at the Manta Resort, off Pemba Island. Footage shows Mr Weber diving under water to ask Ms Antoine to marry him. In the video, Mr Weber, wearing goggles and flippers, presses a hand-written proposal note against the cabin window as Ms Antoine films from inside. She said on Facebook that he “never emerged from those depths” [and] “never got to hear her answer” to his proposal, which would have been “a million times, yes. I will find and marry you in the next lifetime.” The couple had booked four nights at the resort's underwater room,

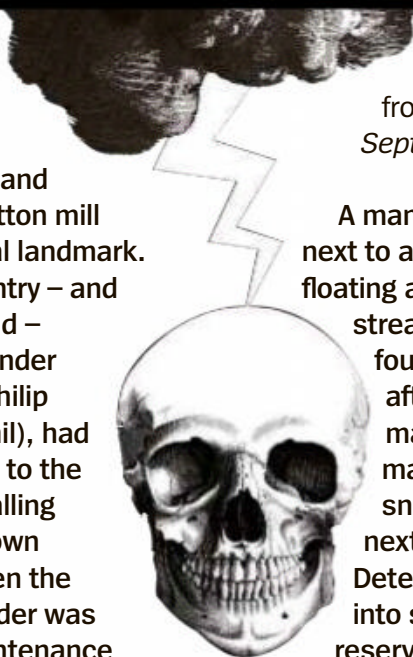
which lies about 250m (820ft) from the shore. *BBC News*, 21 Sept; *Sun*, 22 Sept 2019.

A man trying to pose for a photograph next to a 20ft (6m)-high hill of soapsuds floating atop a heavily polluted stream in Puebla, Mexico, was found dead on 27 July, five days after he fell into the quivering mass and disappeared. The man had asked a co-worker to snap a picture of him standing next to the suds when he fell in. Detergents from houses draining into streams feeding the Valsequillo reservoir caused the soap bubbles to accumulate. The streams also carry household waste and the toxic brew ended up in the Atoyac River. (*Adelaide*) *Sunday Mail*, 28 July 2019.

Alan Seaman, 76, died in a bicycle crash while trying to escape from a swooping magpie in Wollongong, New South Wales. He suffered head injuries on 15 September when he veered off a path and crashed into a park fence south of Sydney, and was thrown head first onto concrete. He later died in hospital. The Australian magpie is a different species from the European bird, and can become aggressive during mating season – but fatal incidents are rare. *BBC News*, [AAP] *sbs.com.au*, *Eve. Standard*, 16 Sept; (*Queensland*) *Courier-Mail*, 17 Sept 2019.

Darren Hickey, 51, from Chorley, Lancashire, died 12 hours after eating a small, scalding fishcake that burned his throat and caused him to stop breathing. Darren Hickey's voice box swelled up on 4 April after he had been asked to sample the food by a chef at a wedding venue in Bolton that he managed. He went to hospital complaining of throat pain, but doctors couldn't see the damage and he was sent home with paracetamol. He collapsed at home that evening and died early the next day. Such deaths are very rare, and are usually seen in house fire victims who have inhaled smoke. *D.Mail*, *D.Star*, 11 Oct 2019.

Two sisters died of brain hæmorrhages within 24 hours of each other. Amanda Williams, 54, collapsed as she was preparing to leave her home in Leicester to be at the bedside of her seriously ill sibling Jacqueline, 57, in Ingolstadt, Germany. Amanda was taken to hospital but died on 7 September, a day after Jacqueline. *Metro*, 19 Sept 2019.



Cosy Crime Pays For Indy Author

Lynn Florkiewicz's dream of being a writer began when she was just six years old, but it had to sit on the back-burner until, at the age of 45, she took a creative writing course with The Writers Bureau, and started out on a whole new adventure...



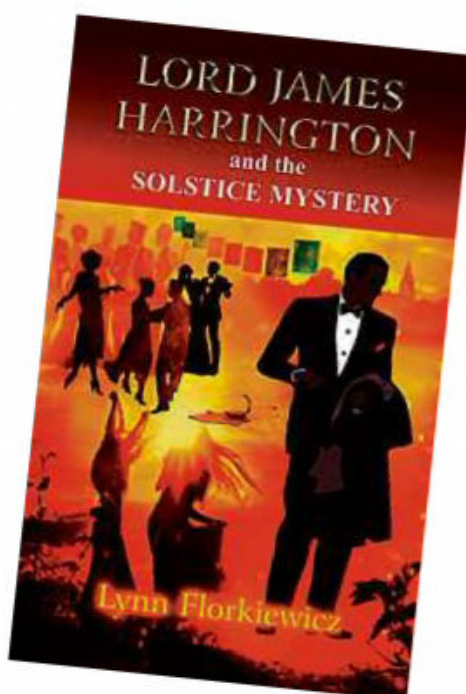
Lynn Florkiewicz

Avid reading as a child laid the foundation for Lynn's love of mystery and crime stories, and she always imagined that one day she'd write her own. When she grew up though, marriage and a promising career as a singer/songwriter on the British and American folk circuits gave her little time to pursue writing until, after a bout of particularly debilitating illness, she decided it was time to bring it to the fore.

Lynn enrolled on The Writers Bureau's Creative Writing Course back in 2001. She worked steadily through its 20 tutor-marked assignments, earning her course fees back from published work and getting placed/highly commended in several writing competitions along the way. Confidence thoroughly boosted, she then decided to try writing a children's adventure story - The Quest for the Crystal Skulls, of which, BBC Springwatch's Michaela Strachen said: 'There are many ways to create awareness about what we're doing to planet Earth, I found this an incredibly powerful and compelling one. I read it in one go.' (The Quest for the Crystal Skulls is available from Amazon and Penpress Partnership Book Publishing).

Inspired by a long-time love of cosy crime (Agatha Christie, Carola Dunn etc), Lynn's next move was to follow her

childhood dream and create her own murder-mystery series. And so it was that Lord James Harrington, country landowner, ex-racing driver and amateur sleuth, was born. When her first whodunit, The Winter Mystery, was launched on Kindle it received a plethora of five-star reviews from cosy crime fans, and that was all the encouragement Lynn needed to write more.



Five years on, and Lord James Harrington is a well-established character with his name on nine book covers. Lynn is already in the process of writing a tenth, with plans to release a new mystery every year. The books are all available from Amazon in Kindle, print and audio format, as well

as from Lord Harrington's very own website: www.lordjamesharrington.com.

'I've created a world that I adore and I love to slip into that imaginary community and meet up with my characters,' says Lynn. 'I am not a literary writer. I'm not here to change the world or make you think, I want to entertain people and, from the feedback I've received, I tick that box.'

Recently, Lord James Harrington was picked-up by Magna Publishing (part of Ulverscroft). They intend to release the whole series in audio and large print formats, and already, the American Audio File Magazine has awarded the first of these recordings with an Earphone Audio Award.

Lynn is just one of many Writers Bureau students who have found their way to publishing success. So if you harbour a dream to write, they can help. Their courses provide students with a professional writer as a personal tutor and cover all types of writing, as well as teaching the business side of being an author. To request free details, contact The Writers Bureau at: www.writersbureau.com or call – 0800 856 2008. Quote ATT19

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